

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

15¢
NOVEMBER



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FEATURE NOVEL

● **FORBIDDEN MESA'S
LIVING DEAD**

by BRANCH CARTER

TWO NOVELETTES

● **KING OF THE
BUCKSKIN LEGION**

by TOM ROAN

● **HOT RAILS TO
LOBO WELLS**

by ART LAWSON

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NEXT ISSUE
PUBLISHED
NOVEMBER 10th

VOLUME XXV

NOVEMBER, 1944

NUMBER 4

- 1—Complete Novel—1
- FORBIDDEN MESA'S LIVING DEAD**.....Branch Carter 10
Fiddle-footed Brett returned home to find that his graveless corpse was a shrine of evil!
- 2—Feature Novelettes—2
- KING OF THE BUCKSKIN LEGION**.....Tom Roan 52
Major Iron Tail Blunt was danged suspicious of Dave Denton—for Denton had come out of a redskin massacre... with his hair on his head!
- HOT RAILS TO LOBO WELLS**.....Art Lawson 80
Ride with Sheriff Bill as he bucks a cordon of railroad renegades.
- 7—Short Stories—7
- SATAN'S GUN TRYST**.....Frank Bonham 29
"Either double-cross your friends—or wear a hangman's noose!"
- JUAN POKER'S BELLS OF DOOM**.....Tom W. Blackburn 38
Facing disgrace, Juan Poker staked his reputation on a broken watch.
- BATTLEFIELD FOR SALE!**.....Don Sloat 43
Lorrigan found that he had purchased the battleground for a range war.
- BULLETS WILD!**.....Gunnison Steele 48
The kid lost his dad's cow money—in a crooked card game.
- NORTH TO HELL**.....Lewis Hopkins 70
A blasting north wind was the only witness to Nick Larson's kill.
- POWDERSMOKE WISDOM**.....G. S. Payne 73
Having trapped his father's murderer, Tim made a strange bargain.
- KILL-MUSIC FOR THE KID**.....Robert Turner 76
Kid Smiles, ace gunhawk, shucked his sixes—and stalked a killer.
- Western Features
- BLAZING THE DEATH TRAIL**.....The Editor 6
Introducing Walt Coburn's new, dynamic Western novel.
- THE WADDIE'S THRONE**.....Joseph W. Quinn 8
The cowpunchers' debt to the Moors of Africa.
- COWBOY FILM CORRAL**.....A Department 75
Behind the scenes with the Western stars.
- COVER—"He fired two fast ones."**
From Hot Rails To Lobo Wells.

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BLAZING THE DEATH TRAIL

WALT COBURN'S vigorous, dramatic novel in the next issue is the fire-and-blood story of a young Utah rancher carrying out the inexorable, secret orders of the dread Danites—the Destroying Angels. Young Brice Morgan, cowpunching on his father's ranch, knew nothing of this mission when the Danites dragged Trapper Strang into their meeting house. And Brice Morgan knew nothing of his father's whereabouts. His father had gone off on a trip one day—and had never returned. Maybe the Danites knew where Prime Morgan had gone. But the Danites weren't saying . . .

Brice Morgan was with the grim, solemn, bearded Danites in that dimly lighted meeting house. He was there—puzzled at why the Danites had summoned him—when the Destroying Angels brought in the half-dead Trapper Strang. And Brice was more puzzled when the elder addressed the beaten, bloody Strang:

"You have betrayed a trust placed in you, Orson Strang." The words rolled deep and sonorous from the white-bearded lips of the man seated on the platform. "You have borne false witness against one of us. And you sought shelter and safety among our enemies. You have murdered. No punishment is too severe for such a traitor. There can be no atonement for your crimes. You cannot escape punishment. . . . But you will live to endure its postponement. Fulfill this final task to the last letter and you shall be rewarded—by a swift and merciful death. Fail in any fraction of your task and the beating you have just endured will be as nothing compared to the suffering on this earth that you will enjoy before death takes you. Are you prepared then, Orson Strang, to accept this mission?"

A look of wolfish cunning flickered in Trapper Strang's eyes. But he made his voice sound cringing: "I got no other choice. Gimme my orders. I'll carry 'em out."

"You know the shortest trail from here to Lee's Ferry on the Colorado River, Strang. Cross the Colorado. Continue across the Territory of Arizona by way of the places I will mark on a map I had

drawn up. Go as far as Yuma, at the furthestmost southwest corner of Arizona Territory. The Territorial prison is located at Yuma. A certain man is being held prisoner within its walls. Your task is to release that prisoner.

"Arrangements have already been made there. They are simple enough. There are two guards. One guard will be bought off. Your task is to kill the other guard. Kill him quietly, secretly. And that, Orson Strang, completes your work."

Trapper Strang licked his lips. "Then what becomes of me?"

"You will return by the shortest route to Skull Valley."

Again that glint of animal cunning showed in Trapper Strang's yellowish-green eyes. "Who is the man in prison?"

"Your cowardly lies sent him there for life. Your punishment shall one day rest in his hands. Your mission is to set that man free. . . . His name is Prime Morgan!"

Brice Morgan's back stiffened, and he gripped the edge of his heavy bench until his knuckles showed bone white. His steel-gray eyes were staring hard at Trapper Strang. So that was the man who had sent his father, Prime Morgan, to the living death at the dread hole Yuma prison. Any pity he'd felt for the tortured, wounded Strang was gone—leaving only a terrible hatred and a cold resolve to kill.

The white-bearded elder's voice went on:

"You'll not go alone, Strang. We are sending a man with you. A man we can trust. Your job is to kill the guard who must be killed. Your companion's duty is to pay the other guard who will be bought off. Your companion's name and pedigree need not matter to you. You will not question him in any manner. You will call him. . . . Brice."

The complete, vivid story of this awesome mission of death will be told by the well-known cowboy author, Walt Coburn, in the next issue. Don't miss "Phantom Scourge of Skull Valley."

December 10 STORY WESTERN—published Nov. 10th.

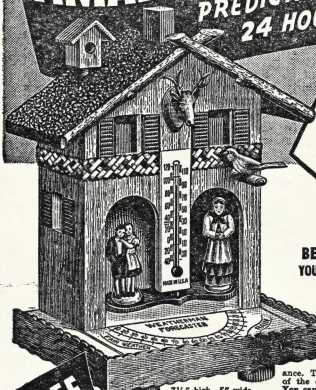
The Editor.



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THE WADDIE'S THRONE

The cowpuncher's debt to the Moors of Africa.

By JOSEPH W. QUINN



HE cowboy's saddle played a keystone role in the development of the West, and consequently in the development of America. Weighing from thirty to little more than forty pounds, the stock saddle combined comfort and beauty and made for efficiency in the cowboy's multiple tasks. Off the horse it was handy as a pillow.

Too, its basic shape and design enabled the night herder to sleep astride his mount with little fear of "falling out of bed."

Throughout the West a man's saddle was his most essential and most treasured possession. All else that he owned he might sell or gamble away, but rarely would he part with his saddle. Indicative of this was the derogatory expression, "He's sold his saddle," meaning that the man who was the target of the remark had hit the skids—was all washed up.

All Western saddles were basically alike. Dissimilarities were in size and the intricacies of design, embellishments and accoutrements.

The saddle's outstanding characteristics were: the forward horn, for snubbing the lariat; the rearward cantle, for aiding the rider in retaining his seat; the tapaderos or "taps," for shielding the stirrups and the rider's boots from brush or the bite of an ornery horse.

The horn and the cantle gave the Western saddle the general shape of a horseshoe. The saddle was made secure to the horse by one or two cinches, usually made of woven horsehair or canvas. Use of the California or single rig, or of the two-cinch double rig, was a matter of rider's choice.

For some strange reason the horses insisted that the forward cinch of a double-rigged saddle be tightened first. To reverse the procedure meant that when the rider had mounted—and not until then—the

horse pointed out the error by dumping him.

All Western saddles had eight pairs of thongs, four pairs on each side. Two pairs hung on each side near the cantle and two pairs hung on each side near the horn. These were used to fasten the rider's "baggage." Some saddles had pockets behind the cantle called cantineses which were for whatever use the rider might find for them.

A buck-strap at the base of the horn was something for the rider to hang on to while his horse was pitching. Because such a device marked a man as a comparatively inferior rider, it was usually omitted in standard saddle equipment.

In the West it was each man to his own saddle. With usage a saddle grew to fit its owner to such an extent that he would be just plumb uncomfortable in any other saddle, no matter how fine and fancy.

A plain saddle was available for as little as \$40.00. Leather of cherry red coloring usually marked the cheaper saddles. The men whose tastes ran toward the elaborate had to pay \$150.00 or more. But the more ornate saddles were things of beauty, intricately stamped leather, many silver trimmings, elaborate taperaderos. Horns could be of steel or silver or nickel and on rare occasion of pure gold.

But plain or fancy the cowboy's cherished throne was by far his most important tool. It was his work-bench and as necessary to him in the successful pursuit of his trade as wheels are to a wagon. Yet, strangely, the cowboy's saddle was not of his own creation. It came to him from the early rancheros of Mexico—and was first brought there by the Spaniards, some four hundred years ago.

Actually, the American cowboy can thank the Moors in Africa for the saddle which basically filled the many needs of his trade. For, more than a thousand years ago, the Moors brought that saddle into Spain.

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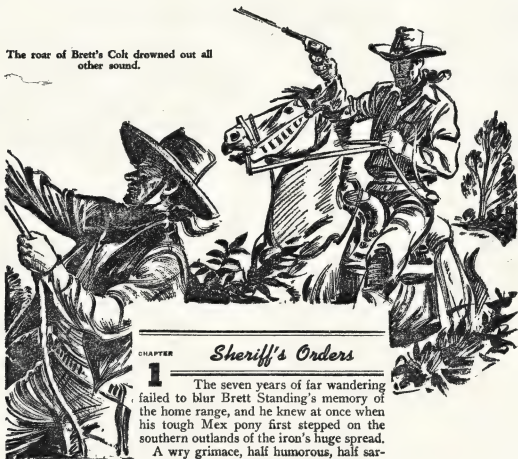
*Powerful, Vivid Novel of the
Old Cow Country*

FORBIDDEN MESA'S LIVING DEAD

By **BRANCH CARTER**

Fiddle-footed Brett Standing returned home after seven years' absence to find that he had acquired the blackest name on the range—and that his graveless corpse was a shrine of evil!

The roar of Brett's Colt drowned out all other sound.



CHAPTER

1

Sheriff's Orders

The seven years of far wandering failed to blur Brett Standing's memory of the home range, and he knew at once when his tough Mex pony first stepped on the southern outlands of the iron's huge spread.

A wry grimace, half humorous, half sar-

donic, twisted his lips as he passed the lone cottonwood, took the easy slope toward the bow in the mesa rim and scanned the crest for the line shack which should be there. . . .

The storms of seven winters had long since scuffed the hoof marks of a madly running horse, but this was the trail he had taken that night, the anger boiling within him sending his mount hell-bent in a straight line for nowhere, his only objective, distance—behind him. Sixteen he'd been then, hot of temper, quick of action, filled with fiery pride. . . .

Brett topped the crest, followed the dip a little way, then a puzzled frown shadowed his gray eyes. The remembered shack was there all right. But now it had a broken roof, sagging walls with the single door slouched drunkenly on its lower hinge.

Brett swung down and while in motion dropped the reins over the little dun's head. He shook his head as he pushed his way through the tangled branches, noting that even the semblance of a trodden path to the door had disappeared. The sense of something of more importance than a dilapidated shack clouded his thoughts. So long as he could remember, the tradition of the Standing S was smart, well-kept buildings from the lowliest outhouses of the home ranch to the most distant line camp.

He came to the doorway, shoved the hanging door wider and stopped athwart the low threshold as abruptly as if a shot had struck him.

Prone on the floor was a figure that once was a man. Now it was a mere skeleton in badly shredded clothes. The mid-afternoon sun slanted downward through the small, square western window full on the skull, and less keen eyes than those of Brett Standing couldn't have missed the ragged hole in the frontal bone, the smaller opening at the base. The bullet which had bored through there had indubitably come from behind.

Brett noted this almost subconsciously, his thoughts probing at the mystery of the tragedy, the lonely aspect of the once well-kept shack, seeking a possible reason for its neglect and the body lying here so long undisturbed.

Wild animals alone had been at work here, scattering the torn clothing, and a stray piece, with pattern intact, caught Brett's roving glance. He stepped quickly

forward, stooped and retrieved it, then stood, staring at it blankly as his mind flashed back through the years. He remembered it well, an Indian decorated buckskin shirt of his boyhood fancy. And that recognition gave Brett an approximate date of this happening.

He tossed the scrap aside and looked down at the poor figure. The right arm was thrown outward, as if still in the gesture of falling, and on one crushed finger bone was a golden circlet. Brett went to one knee to peer more closely, staring at it unbelievably.

For that ring, as the shirt, had been his own.

He stood up slowly, and the deep tan on his cheekbones, above the beard, paled slightly. To anyone who might remember that ring and gaudy shirt, that thing at his feet might be taken for himself, Brett Standing.

But Brett, at least, knew it wasn't, and, touching nothing, he backed out broodingly, striving desperately to reset the scene as a sixteen-year-old lad had known it—with its several characters of interest to him, their relative situations and of what each was capable, both good and bad. Yet, engaged as he was with these thoughts, he could not entirely quench the dread of certain knowledge, stirring remorse in him—and a kindling, deadly anger.

Again in the saddle he sat for a few moments immobile. Twenty miles by mesa, ridge and valley was the home ranch. He'd been wondering with wry humor what his welcome would be there. Now humor had no place in his mind. Instead, he was suspicious and alert, as one might well be, stepping suddenly from broad daylight of fancied security into treacherous darkness.

Finally, he decided that he needed information of the seven years' happenings before putting that welcome to the test. He raised his rein hand and the tireless little mustang swung into a lope.

Off the mesa, Brett skirted a strip of impassable chaparral and entered a broad, shallow valley dotted by little islands of cottonwood fringed by bushy growth. The pounding hoofs made little sound in the soft going, and as Brett approached the first small patch he heard the bawling of a calf.

Nearer still, a woman's shrill tones broke above the animal sound, carrying a note of

anger or of fear. Brett swung closer to the bushes, then checked the little dun as the woman cried again.

"Don't! Don't do that!" It was a cry of anguish.

"Keep still, you little hellcat," came a rough growl.

Brett parted the bushes and the dun stepped softly ahead.

In the clearing just before him was a strange scene. Three persons had their backs toward him; a girl struggling frantically in the grasp of a burly puncher; a second man beside them, and all three gazing at still a fourth figure dangling by a rope over a cottonwood limb. From the attitude of the three, the writhing figure and twisting rope, it was apparent that the stringing up had just been accomplished.

THE roar of Brett's Colt drowned all other sound. Like puppets on the same string, all three jerked around. What they saw was a young fellow sitting quietly in the saddle, his features almost indistinguishable between a curling brown beard and the low pulled brim of his Stetson. There was no gun in either hand resting lightly on the saddlehorn and only a slight wisp of smoke gave proof from what direction the shot had come.

The girl, released from the hold of the startled puncher, leaned forward. She cried, "You have shot him!"

"I reckon not," Brett answered softly. "But mebbe you oughter loose' his necktie a mite."

An incredulous look twisted the ugly features of the burly puncher as the three whirled the other way.

The girl, with a strangled cry, threw herself down beside the fourth figure, now prone on the ground, and tore frantically at the noose tight about his neck.

Brett noticed that the hanged man was squirming slightly and his lips held a tight grin as the two hangmen turned to face him again. They were a tough looking pair in any man's backyard. The girl's captor glared at Brett from close-set black eyes above a hawk nose and drooping mustache, tobacco stained. His companion was taller and lighter, a lanky fellow, with lantern jaw and mean, shifting greenish eyes.

The burly one spat. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded angrily.

"Me?" Brett said innocently. "Why, I'm judge and cou't, and I'm aimin' to reopen this case and lissen to evidence."

"Why you—" the puncher began. He started to crouch a little, tensing. Brett didn't move as much as an eyelash, and the slight grin still widened his lips. Some thought crossed the big man's mind. He eased upright, turned his head slowly and glanced at the frayed rope-end swinging from the limb. As he swung back, his glance swept his companion standing stock still, his bony hands dangling at his sides. He frowned disgustedly, but the lanky man didn't change his expression.

"Mebbe you got a star or somethin'," the big man spoke sarcastically to Brett Standing, "showin' you gotta right to butt in hyar."

Brett sifted tobacco into the paper in his left hand, holding the string of the sack between his teeth as his limber left fingers fashioned a tight cylinder.

"You didn't get me, fella," Brett drawled. "It's a judge runnin' this cou't—Judge Colt. If you got any doubt o' his authority, why, you 'n' Lanky Bob there better turn your wildcats loose. If you ain't," his tone didn't raise but got a little harder, "go ahead and speak your piece. The judge's honin' to get the right o' this."

"Tell him, Jeb," the lanky one spoke for the first time. "Hell, if he knowed the score he'd help us string the skunk."

Watching the burly Jeb, Brett was aware that the girl, from her kneeling position beside the half-strangled man, suddenly raised her head and gave him a long, studied look.

Jeb shrugged. He nodded his head off to one side where the hogtied calf lay beside a small fire. "Ef you got eyes a-tall," he growled, "you can see that thar calf. Oncet he had a Standin' S blaze. Still got it—under the Bar B blot."

"I'll take your word so far," Brett said. "What does that make?"

"Hell, you're dumb! That stray come off Standin' S range, or more likely was choused over here to Bar B. Me and Jim here was checkin', seen this fire an' caught the feller jest doin' his blottin'. There's the calf, there's the iron an' there's the feller. Wantin' any more?"

"It's a lie!" the girl said hotly. "My brother and I heard the calf bawling in this motte. It isn't the first time the Standing S

has made trouble for us. I told Alec to be careful, but he rushed in here and those two men came in with their guns on him."

Brett nodded slowly. There was something here he wanted explained, chiefly this Bar B spread where it had all been Standing S. Then that shack, with its gruesome occupant, back on the tip of the mesa, must be on the new range. Brett suddenly decided that he would like to talk with the man gasping for breath on the ground.

Brett grinned at Jeb. "Your evidence," he drawled, "goes to show your brand was blotted but there ain't no reliable proof yet of who did it. An' seein' you've already done too much here, the judge rules you get goin'."

Jeb's face was black with anger. "Aw, hell, Jim," he spat out, with his pig-eyes slanted on Brett. "Let's get outta here. This feller got eyes only fur a purty doll. Say," he spoke suddenly, half turned, with right side and right hand away from Brett, "seein' you spoiled my rope, how 'bout givin' me yourn?"

"SURE," Brett agreed readily. His right hand started toward his saddlehorn, then, so far as the others saw it, seemed to hang in mid-air. But there was a gun in it now and the roar blended with that of Jeb's drawn pistol. Jeb's lead thudded into the ground as his gun slipped from Jeb's hand and was joined by Jeb's lifeless body with a bullet through its heart.

Even before the echoes came back, Brett's muzzle was lined on the lanky man.

Jim shook his head. "I ain't playin', partner." His voice was just a little shaky. "Not with a feller who's got a gun that'll jump into his hand like I seen yours done."

"It's a trick gun," Brett told him, with the Colt no longer in his grasp. "Ever' time a fella tries to bushwhack me I know it, 'cause it's right here in my hand."

And there it was again, yet Jim hadn't seen even a blur of movement.

Jim shook his head, again, a little wild eyed. "I getcha, mister."

"Well, get Jeb on his cayuse an' beat it."

Brett smoked the cigarette that had never left his lips, until sound of the hoofbeats died. He kept his eyes on the still prostrate man as he walked over, but he'd already had a somewhat disturbing eyeful of the girl's lithe, erect figure, dark eyes flashing

with emotion, full, sensitive mouth and dark brown hair above an intelligent forehead. His seven years of wandering had produced nothing like this, and he instinctively fought against a new, strange feeling that thrust itself upon him.

He frowned down at a slender, young fellow, a little older and in a way a replica of the girl. The young man's breathing was more regular now as he lay on his back, wide open eyes staring at the sky. The angry red welt showed clearly about his neck, with blood oozing from the bruised skin where the knot had taken hold. He'd had a close call, all right, but he wasn't snapping out of it.

A hand rested on Brett's arm, and for a moment he looked straight into those disturbing dark eyes. Then the girl looked slantingly down at her brother and the hand slid away.

"We owe you a lot," she said, "that we can never pay. My brother's life this time." She turned her head to him, and there was no softness in her eyes now. "How can men kill so callously?" she demanded. "They had no scruples about hanging him. . . . And you are no more concerned over that man you just shot."

"Yeh, I reckon I'm a mite more interested that my skin is whole," he said gruffly. "I'm taking a little pasear over yonder," he said with the same gruffness. "Your brother looks all right. Hope he can talk in a coupla minutes."

"I've hurt your feelings," the girl said quickly. "Believe me—"

"That's all right," Brett said more lightly. "It would take an awful lot to poke a hole through this tough skin of mine."

He went a short distance beyond the end of the motte in the direction taken by Lanky Jim, then circled and came back. The young fellow was up on his feet now but with a hand on his sister's shoulder for support.

"That calf was choused right enough," Brett told the girl, "between a coupla cayuses, one with the same splay like that Lanky Jim rode."

"Then you believe me?" asked the girl in a quiet voice.

"Shucks, miss, I reckon I believed you when you first yelled, or I might not have come pokin' my nose in here."

For some reason the girl flushed.

The young fellow was studying Brett soberly, making little between beard and low Stetson brim, yet hardly missing the lithe, powerful build of the stranger and his confident poise.

"Barbara tells me," the young fellow said, "that I owe my life to you, and I thank you. However, that won't save me long."

"Meanin' what?"

"They'll say I killed the man you shot and send a crew of their gunmen to wipe us both out."

"That is what was worrying me," Barbara added, "when I spoke to you just—"

"It don't have to," Brett said quickly. "I'm headin' to town and I'll tell it to th' sheriff."

"He won't believe you," the girl said, "if they talk to him first."

"Now wait a minute," Brett's tone was puzzled. "Seems like I heard no coyote could fox Bat Gourlay."

"Mr. Gourlay is no longer sheriff. He has a spread south and west of the Standing S. Sheriff Haines takes his orders from them."

CHAPTER

2

Without Badge . . .

Brett's gray eyes narrowed and hardened. When he spoke, his tone gave no indication of the sudden turmoil of his thoughts. "Then I reckon you'd better set me straight on this. Who's runnin' this Standin' S, what-all seems to have it in for you two?"

"Daniel Standing is still the owner," Barbara explained, "but ever since he was shot he's been partly paralyzed and I'm sure he doesn't know all that is going on."

"Shot—huh?" Brett ground his teeth on the questions wanting to pour forth. "When'd that happen?"

"About six or seven years ago," the brother, Alec, put in. "His own son, Brett Standing, tried to kill him—but fortunately the bullet only creased his spine."

"Yeh—go on," Brett said a little hoarsely then cleared his throat. "What's come o' this Brett?"

"Guy Fearing told me," Barbara answered, "shortly after we came here. Guy

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is Daniel's nephew. He got to the ranch just too late to prevent the shooting. He chased the murderer, caught up with him just west of here—on Forbidden Mesa, they call it—and killed him in a gun fight."

Brett turned quickly, making pretense of sudden, if unnecessary, interest in the quiet little dun. This, in all truth, was the grandfather of all sockers. So Cousin Guy Fearing had told this story, had told without doubt that the body in the shack was Brett's body, a would-be patricide. A wry grimace touched Brett's tight lips. His happiest memory of that last day at the home ranch was that of whaling hell out of his sneering, bullying cousin.

He turned back to the two who were watching him curiously. Brett gripped his flaring rage and asked an odd question out of the confusion of his thoughts:

"How'd this fella Guy take it, killin' his cousin?"

Alec glanced quickly at his sister, and it was Barbara who answered.

"Sometimes I feel that I don't know Guy very well although he has always been nice to us." She averted her eyes for a moment from Brett's keen glance. "Often he seems depressed, but I don't know whether it is from what you said—or missing his younger brother. Robert Fearing was that terrible Brett's age and they were close friends. Guy said that Robert was so shocked by what Brett had done that he left the ranch the same night of the tragedy and has never been heard of since. . . . Why—what—what have I said?" She recoiled from the sudden blaze in Brett's eyes.

"Sorry," he told the girl. "I reckon I don't hear such things ever' day. Now, where do you-all, this Bar B iron, come in?"

"Father and Daniel Standing were boyhood friends back in Missouri. Father brought us out here when he didn't have long to live. Daniel gave us this part of his range. Our home ranch is two miles north. This is the extreme southern limit of our range—at the edge of this valley."

"Swing east quite a piece?"

"Only as far as the chaparral." She glanced at Brett strangely. "We paid nothing for this range. The only condition was that neither we nor any of our riders should ever go beyond that barrier."

"Kinder funny," Brett commented.

"Hm. Where'd they bury this fella Brett?"

Alec gave a short, grim laugh. "That started the legend. Men call a place over there haunted. Guy wanted to bring Brett's body back but old Daniel said it should stay there and rot. Anyway, no one ever goes over that way, as Barbara said."

"Bar B," Brett said absently. "After Barbara?"

"Barbara Bradley," she explained and seemed a little confused by his hard, direct look.

A slight stirring behind him drew Brett's alert attention. The tough little Mex pony stood with head raised, ears straight ahead. Then Brett caught the faint thud of distant hoofbeats, from the direction where the Standing S puncher had gone. Barbara stepped beyond a screening bush and shaded her eyes.

"I think it is Guy," she said, coming back. "He'll help us, Alec."

Brett hesitated for one brief moment. He knew he would kill Guy Fearing if he waited there. Then sense checked the desire. Killing Fearing wouldn't solve his problem—right now. He smiled at the girl.

"Then you won't be needin' me right now. I'll be movin'."

"Please don't. I know Guy will want to thank you, and I—" Then she added, as he was already turning away. "I've told you our names. I would like to know yours, for sometime—"

"I am a ghost," Brett told her, "and ghosts don't have names."

He swung into the saddle with a swift, lithe motion, then walked the dun along the screen of bushes until he heard the hoofbeats drumming up the other side of the motte.

BRETT had told the girl he was a ghost, and memory ghosts rode the saddle with him on the hitch into town. Old Daniel's harsh words rankled in his soul, but more than they was the thought that Daniel could believe his only son had shot him. True, they had parted in raging anger, yet Brett had no recollection of a pistol shot—although he had to admit he remembered little of those last moments until he found himself pounding through the dark night. Somebody had lied to the old man, and the only one Daniel might have

believed was the cause of their quarrel, sly Guy Fearing.

He let the tireless little pony fox-trot down the dusty street of the settlement-town with the sun dipped below the horizon and the shadows of night spreading out from the western foothills.

Seemingly indifferent as any wandering cowpuncher, his eyes took in the old familiar places; Bill George's blacksmith shop, with the anvil's pleasant ringing coming from the dim interior; Sol Nerf's Emporium, unpainted, drab and dust-grimed; Alf Carson's Eating Place. But that was closed now. Boards took the place of Alf's once showy window.

He headed for the hotel and livery stable once kept by Tom Mott. Beyond the dull, two-storied frame building was Tony Mendez' saloon, and Tony, if still here, was the one man Brett wanted to palaver with. Tony had been his pal when he used to color Brett's soda pop with sarsaparilla to let the punchers think he was drinking man's liquor.

Just beyond Tony's was the sheriff's office and the little group there effectually stopped any day dreaming on Brett's part.

A big girthed, bareheaded man stood on the step before the open door. He had a round, puffy, moon face. On his vest was a star. That would be the new sheriff, Haines, who would "believe only what Standing S told him." Brett dismissed him with a brief, sizing-up glance. Facing Haines and back toward Brett was a more familiar figure, that of Jeb's companion, Lanky Jim. Brett took little heed of the two punchers siding Jim as he turned the dun behind the protection of the hotel.

Brett saw to it that the dun had feed but no bedding. He would be traveling further that night—if his master could still fork the saddle. There was a surrey, with light pole for a pair, in the yard, and Brett glanced at it curiously. He had observed the two harness horses in the stalls and lantern light had shown the Standing S brand on their flanks. The stable boy was a loutish lad and Brett asked him no questions.

Two doors, on either side of the hotel desk, led into the dining room. With the caution now on him, Brett chose the rear one and at once saw old Tom Mott officiously watching a waitress serve four men at a table up front. Mott's broad back

screened them and Brett took the first small table before looking that way. Then a bit of nostalgia hit him.

It was a sight and a custom once familiar to him; old friends gathered for a dinner before the weekly poker game. He recognized instantly the chubby figure of the local banker; the cadaverous form and thin, intellectual face of Doc Wilson. The third man, evidently a rancher by appearance, was unknown to him. Then Mott moved aside and a thickness gathered in Brett's throat momentarily choking him.

A big man was propped to the table in a wheel chair. He was faced three-quarters away from Brett, but there was no mistaking the big shoulders, the grizzled head now canted stiffly to one side. Daniel Standing—his father.

Brett checked an impulsive move, then settled down in his chair. This was no time to tell his story. He needed another story to corroborate his innocence—one that he would get that night, if he lived.

Old Tom discovered that he had another guest, came over and gazed at him with dim-sighted eyes.

Brett handed him some money.

"I'm paying for my dinner and hoss' feed," Brett told him.

"Not stoppin', huh? Wall, I reckon 'tain't no use if you're lookin' to ride." Mott sighed and glanced over at the others. "When Old Dan was up an' standin' you coulda got your job for the askin'—that is, if you had a clean whistle. Things 're different now."

He dropped the change on the table and went away mumbling.

Brett had noticed that a fifth, empty, chair was drawn to the other table. He had finished his steak and fixings and had his coffee cup to his lips when a man came in to take it, and Brett's gray eyes narrowed and were hard as steel.

IF TWENTY instead of seven years had passed he couldn't mistake that quick, nervous step, the tall, slender form and smart appearance of his cousin, Guy Fearing. Just past thirty now, the man still sported the same slight mustache above thin lips that could sneer or smile in friendliest fashion. At the moment, Guy Fearing was apologetic and solicitous with a word to Daniel Standing.

Fearing seated himself, gave Brett a long, hard stare; then spoke to the other men. All but Old Dan glanced over, one after the other nodding their heads to Fearing. Guy beckoned Tom Mott to him.

Brett was ready to leave and anxious to get going, but he had to know the meaning of this. If it was the showdown, he'd make it complete even if he had only half the answers. Regretfully he recalled his reply to the girl: "I'm a ghost, and ghosts don't have names." Perhaps Barbara had repeated that to Guy Fearing and perhaps Guy had guessed who that ghost could be.

Old Tom lumbered over.

"Men want to know if you'd like to play 'em a little poker. Square game, son." He leaned closer. "Seein' you're so quiet-like, on'y fella you might watch is the las' one come in."

So that was it. Guy Fearing was curious; possibly guessing but not yet certain.

Brett shook his head. "Haven't got time," he said. "I'm ridin'." He got up slowly and left the room.

In the deserted back yard he made and smoked a cigarette.

Old Dan had aged perceptibly. Had to be wheeled around in a chair, couldn't fork a horse, had to be carried in a surret. Not once had Brett seen him move his head except in the mechanical motions of eating.

Finally he pinched the last of the smoke, then ground it savagely into the dirt. He drew the Colt, confirmed that he had replaced the emptied cartridges and slid it loosely back into the holster. The boy was not around. Brett saddled the dun but instead of mounting, led the animal into the darkness a short distance directly back of Tony Mendez' place.

Many was the time Brett had slipped out that back way of Tony's when the watchful saloonkeeper had warned him of his father's approach; for Daniel was a martinet over Brett and sure as hell, if he'd found the youngster inside and the glass before him, he'd have swung the quirt he always carried, without waiting for an explanation. It was a game they played, the stocky half-Mex, half-American and the growing kid; the innocent drink to fool the punchers; the narrow escapes from Daniel. It had made them pals.

Brett moved quietly to that back door. He found the door ajar for ventilation. He

slipped through and into the back room, dark except for the light coming from another partly open door leading into the bar. He peered through. At the far end of the bar four or five punchers were in heated discussion and among them Brett saw Lanky Jim. Brett scanned the faces of his companions and found them of the same evil stripe.

As he watched briefly, another and familiar form moved into view back of the counter. There was the same stocky figure, the huge shoulders surmounted by thick neck and round, bullet head. But Tony was almost bald now.

Brett chose the moment when the cowmen reached for the glasses Tony filled, and slipped quietly in. The bar was at his left; one and important reason why he had chosen the back entrance. With his left elbow resting on the counter, his right hung free. Twenty feet separated him from the group, and while apparently his eyes were fixed on the barman he couldn't miss the slightest movement of Lanky Jim and his friends.

Tony replaced his bottle, saw the bearded man who had miraculously appeared at the far rear end and scowled his surprise and resentment. He came slowly down, staring hard at Brett's face, the beard, the tall, well knit figure.

"Whiskey," Brett growled; then added softly: "And don't put any sarsaparilla in it, Tony."

The barman stooped quickly, reaching under the counter for a bottle. "*Madre de Dios!*" Tony gasped.

Under cover of the hand caressing his mustache Brett said in low tone: "I'm in a tight, Tony. Where do I get to Bat Gourlay?"

Bottle neck clicked slightly against glass as Tony poured. He was scowling darkly.

"Straight wes' dis road, kid," he muttered. "Firs' fork right, T'ree-four mile."

There was a stirring at the other end of the bar. Brett didn't miss Lanky Jim's start of surprise or the concern on his long face. He spoke low to his companions and the group opened a little.

"Half dollar," Tony rapped.

"Find out what they're cookin'," Brett said softly. "And move or you'll be stoppin' lead." He dropped a cartwheel on the bar and it rang clearly.

CHAPTER

3

Bar B Fight!

Tony gathered it up, moved along close to the men, where apparently he had a cash drawer, for he bent over and took a long time over whatever he was engaged on. Then he straightened and let out a roar of swift Spanish oaths about *malo dinero*. In his hand he had a dollar piece which he thumped on the bar with a dull, leaden sound as he strode back to Brett.

Then followed Tony's lurid opinion of a man who would try to pass a lead dollar on him, but between the loud tones he managed to convey his message, which, with what he already knew, Brett put together understandably.

They had been fixing to go out to the Bar B spread late at night and string up young Alec Bradley as the killer of Jeb. The sudden appearance of Brett changed the plan to a certain extent.

"Now dey fix to kill you, son, an' *pronto*. I blow 'em to hell, firs'."

The punchers were all looking at them now, shifting unobtrusively, as if to see better, leaving a little open space at each man's right.

Tony leaned far over, to grasp the second sound dollar Brett was proffering.

"Dat dark feller, Lazero," he whispered.

"He's mighty quick wit' gun."

"You keep out—" Brett began, then stopped as the batwing doors swung open, and Guy Fearing stepped in.

Fearing's glance, sweeping past the men, fell on Brett and he stopped short while the leering smile on his lips was wiped off. A moment he stood, staring, then he beckoned Lanky Jim to him, said something swiftly, turned and went out. The lanky cowpuncher turned back to the men.

"I get my gun," Tony muttered. "You high-tail."

Brett laughed at him. "Leave it alone, Baldy. You don't know it but I've growed up."

"Hi-yah, Tony," the long Jim called. "Set 'em up, an' pour one for the stranger."

"Thanks," Brett drawled, "but I've got everything I need, killer."

Dark Lazero sneered as he bellied up to the bar with the rest, while Tony, his face a thundercloud, moved up with a bottle.

This was Brett's chance to slip out if he

wanted to. Instead, with glass in left hand, he sipped his drink slowly, and he didn't have long to wait.

The batwings swung open again and big, pot-bellied Sheriff Haines came in, alone. His little pig-eyes took in the situation and fixed their gaze on Brett. He started forward but he didn't look at all happy. And, as if it was a prearranged signal, the punchers spread out in a thin line, filling the space between the bar and the other wall, with Lazero nearest the latter.

Brett continued to sip his whiskey calmly until the fat sheriff came to a halt four feet from him. Haines hadn't come far or fast but he was out of breath when he spoke.

"I aim to tell you, feller," he wheezed, "t'won't do you no good to act up. I've deppitized them five fellers behind me an' ever'one's a cutter."

"What's your bellyache, Fatty?" Brett asked softly.

The putty face before him went purple for a moment then turned almost white. Sweat broke out on the forehead and trickled down the round cheeks.

Brett was standing easily erect, his left side close to the bar. He appeared to be looking only at the ponderous sheriff but he knew exactly what each man was doing at the end of the long room.

"I'm 'restin' you for murderin' Jeb Faber," Haines finally got out.

Brett smiled. "Then you don't figure Alec Bradley downed him an' anything done to Alec would be plum' wrong, huh?"

"Wall, I dunno," the sheriff said in some confusion. "Some folks says one thing—others says something else."

"But Guy Fearing told you I did the killing."

"I ain't seen Fearing."

"You're lyin'," Brett said softly, then added in the same tone, "Poke your nose over your belly, Haines, an' look at this."

The sheriff hadn't seen the slightest movement of Brett's shoulder or arm but as he automatically obeyed instructions he looked at the big Colt lined squarely on his huge midsection.

He gasped: "You wouldn't do it?"

"I'll splatter your guts against your backbone," Brett promised him, "if there's anything funny's started back yonder."

"Fellers—" Haines bawled over one shoulder—"don't do nothin'!"

Brett saw the sneer on Lazero's face as the man turned his right side a little farther away, with his right hand drawing slowly from sight. He saw something else, too, that he would never have believed possible in that country. Lanky Jim deliberately turned his back, unbuckled his belt and laid gun and all on a table beside him, then took a step away from it. The thud was plainly audible in the brief silence.

"Lissen, Haines," Brett said in the same quiet tone. "I don't have to wait for those fellas. I can start it myself, an' I'm goin' to if you don't act right."

"Sure, sure. I won't take you in now."

"Nor ever. Unpin that star and toss it to me, pronto."

The fat man's eyes popped. In his brief hesitation, Brett saw Lazero's right shoulder hunch slightly; he saw the black muzzle of the gun creeping around the puncher's thigh. Brett moved his own Colt slightly—and let the hammer fall. At the crashing roar, Haines jumped and the sound of his feet blended with the thud as Lazero's lifeless body hit the floor.

Out in the street a man called and another answered. Brett stepped just beyond the big sheriff's screening body but with the Colt again on Haines' midriff. Murderous looks were shot at him but no man moved. Brett held out his left hand.

"Toss it, Haines."

Haines' fingers fumbled at the star but he got it loose and tossed it over. Brett thrust it into a pocket, then moved backward to the door, felt it with his free hand, and the last thing to disappear was that steady Colt. Behind him, as he sped across the dark room, he heard Tony's roar:

"I blas' off de firs' head of any feller moves!"

BRETT swung up the right fork of the road straight west and a short distance beyond made out the loom of buildings and a stockade corral. As he drew nearer he saw that the long, low bunkhouse was dark but there was a light in the home ranch house across the yard. Brett tied the dun to a corral pole and walked over.

He clumped noisily up the steps and along the corridor to the oblong of light of the open door. A man, hearing the step, appeared in the entrance, almost com-

pletely blocking it but not enough to prevent the light from striking the face of the visitor.

"Got time for a few questions, Bat?" Brett asked softly.

"Don't know who the hell you are," came the booming answer. "But come in, come in." He stepped back and Brett entered, and for a moment the two men stood there, studying each other.

They were of a height but Gourlay was a huge man, with great chest, a fine, upflung head and straight, steady look. Brett was smiling quietly.

"Reckon I oughter know you, son," Bat Gourlay rumbled. "You 'mind me of someone, but danged if I do. Set down an' get off your palaver. I'm homin' to go to bed."

Brett shook his head. "You're ridin' some first," he said.

"Huh?" It should have been a mild question but it was more of a roar, as Bat sat upright in his chair. He jerked his grizzled head backward toward an open account book. "Them figgers got me all jiggered up. Now don't get me riled no more. Start talkin' an' talk straight."

"Who names the sheriff hereabouts?" Brett asked.

Bat frowned. "Was a time when everybody followed what Dan Standin' said, bein' old Dan was square as they come. Lately, fellers callin' 'emselves Standin' S are doin' the talkin'."

"Then Standing S still fires and hires, huh?"

"Reckon so." Bat's steel gray eyes were searching, probing. "But you ain't gettin' nowhere fast. What 'bout that ridin' you was so high an' mighty 'bout namin'?"

"Guy Fearing's sending his men out to string up young Alec Bradley while Guy gets an alibi playin' poker in town and most like will go out an' console the gal, Barbara, after he hears it's done. Claim is Alec killed a Standin' S rider, which happens to be a teetotal lie. I don't reckon you goin' to let 'em do that, Bat."

Bat Gourlay got up to his full six feet. "By dam!" he roared, "if I had 's much as a patch o' law on me I'd ride them hellions outa the country. But what call I got now?"

"We'll come to that in a minute, Bat," Brett said quietly. "After that you an' I are taking a pasear out on Forbidden

Mesa, as I hear it called. You ain't been out that way lately?"

"Not fur seven, eight year—sence young Brett Standin' was shot. But look a hyar. You've throwed your rope far enough. You ain't Bob Fearin, 'though he favors you more'n his brother. Just who the hell are you, mister?"

"You wouldn't believe me, Bat—so I'll have to show you. Let me have a pair o' shears and your razor, will you?"

Grumbling, Bat Gourlay produced the implements and showed Brett to the kitchen where he could find water and soap. He returned to the "office." In a few minutes Brett appeared on the threshold and faced him.

Bat stared, then his rugged jaw dropped. He rumbled. "You can't be. Brett Standin' was kilt—so ever'body said."

"So they said," Brett repeated. "And they lied. Come on, Bat. We ain't got much time. What men you got you can depend on?"

"I got seven of the old Standin' S riders when they brought in these hellions." Bat seemed in a daze. "But I ain't got no real right."

"Hell, Bat. All you need is guts. You got the right. You just told me it's Standin' S that fires and hires. All right; Standin' S fired Haines a little back—" he reached in his pocket and handed over the ex-sheriff's star—"an' is puttin' this on you."

He calmly attached the pin to Bat's shirt.

"Meanin' you, Brett? You ain't tellin' me you took this offen Al Haines? He's got the hull danged gang behind him, includin' those gun-slingers Jeb Faber and Pete Lazero."

"He ain't got those two any more. Get movin', Bat. You gotta give me a hoss. My Mex pony oughter be played out 'though he don't know it."

Bat fastened the clasp on the star while his gaze was fixed on Brett with a hard, unreadable expression. "Seein' I'm sheriff," he drawled, "I reckon mebber first thing I oughter do is run you in, son, for that long-ago shootin'."

Brett swung quick to face him, and for the first time since he had entered Gourlay's place his gray eyes flashed with anger. "There's quite some folks 'round here," he said, "got to do me a heap of explainin' why they believe I would shoot my dad. And among others, they include my father."

"And that, by dam'," Bat Gourlay said, "is the most sense I've heard in seven long years."

He had buckled on his belt with the old Peacemaker. Now he caught up a rifle and followed Brett out the door. And barely had he closed it behind him before his roar chased the silence from the immediate vicinity:

"Hi-yi-yippee! Come outa there, you loggerheads!" A tousled head appeared at

*DOES THE
MOON AFFECT
YOU, TOO?*

*NO, I GET MY
EFFECT WITH
STARS -
STAR BLADES!*



4 for 10¢



the bunkhouse door. "Tell the boys to bring their shootin'-irons an' to grab cayuses. We're ridin'."

THEY cut across country, heading straight for the young Bradleys' Bar B, following a course about equal in distance to that from the town, yet Brett Standing was worried. He figured that the fracas at Tony's, with the killing of Pete Lazero, would serve, not as a deterrent, but as an incentive for immediate revenge, somewhere. Thus he judged that Fearing had already gathered sufficient numbers for the raid and were on the way.

Brett had drawn a lively paint from Bat's corral and the way he pushed the willing animal caused the big man to frown. Bat was leading the cavalcade of eager riders but when their trail emerged from a strip of sparse growth on to an open mesa, he and Brett rode stirrup to stirrup.

"I never took to that idea," Bat said, as if there had been no interruption to their last words at the ranch. "Then who do you reckon done it, Brett?"

"I rode plumb into this hell-mess," Brett told him, "knowing nothing about it. I'm goin' to show you what I saw, Bat, an' you can make up your own mind."

They drifted down a slope and struck into the broad, shallow valley. Soon they were passing the motte where Brett's day's troubles had really started.

A sharp oath from Bat Gourlay broke into his thoughts. Up ahead there was a slight glow against the skyline. And now it was Bat who was not sparing his horse, while the men, no longer content to follow, began to spread out, making a bowed, racing line, of thundering hoofs.

The glow was brighter but the blaze which caused it was below a rim in the sloping mesa. Then they came to the rim and the meager ranch buildings were spread out below them in a broad hollow, just beyond a patch of cottonwood and shrubs. They pounded down the slope, flanking a side of the cottonwoods, spurred on by a sudden blast of gunfire.

And now they saw that a small outbuilding, a toolshed, was burning, lighting up the side of the ranch house and the yard between, leaving the other side in comparative darkness. From somewhere off beyond the blazing building, to the right of the rac-

ing horsemen, a man was firing slowly at the house and from one of the windows a rifle was answering.

The big sheriff and Brett, slightly in the lead, passed the last of the cottonwoods. Bat swept an arm over his head and to the left. Then his rifle was out of its scabbard and in his hand. Clear of the ranch house, Brett saw a scattered line of men running toward the darkened side of the building. Brett and Bat drew their mounts to a sliding stop. Bat growled, "Too late for holierin'," and fired his rifle.

Brett swung from the saddle, dragging his own rifle free, hearing the swift pumping of Bat's shots as he raced for the porch. Before he reached it, others were joining Bat. The marauders were beginning to answer. Flattened against the porch, Brett moved swiftly toward the corner. A glance back showed the men strewn along the ground, flanking the big sheriff and firing steadily. One, however, was hazing the horses back toward the shelter of the cottonwoods.

CHAPTER

4

Guy's Story...

Peering around the corner, Brett made out at least a half dozen flashing rifles and, beyond the last, several dark figures moving over toward the back of the house. Without hesitating, he raced back to the corner lighted by the burning shack, paused briefly for anything from the single gunman on that side, then, stooping low, ran to the far north corner and threw himself flat.

Almost instantly, his rifle stock was against his cheek. The sights lined on the first of skulking figures, he pulled trigger. He saw the man pitch headlong. Brett was shifting to the second when lead thudded into the wall close above his head.

"Can't you get inside the house?" a clear voice called from a window.

"Keep back, Barbara!" he yelled back, and downed his second man.

Dirt flew close beside him; something struck heavily against his right shoulder as the half-spent bullet clipped him. He flexed his arm, found it working and pumped two quick shots where he'd seen the flashes.

"You're wounded!" the girl called again. "Any window on the north side?" he shouted above the general gunfire.

"Two small ones."

"Run to the front. Call in a coupla the men there. Quick!"

Having sent the girl to temporary safety, Brett turned back to his own affair, but before he could get another shot off, lead clipped his sombrero. But on top of that last shot, another sounded from the same direction and when he neither felt nor heard its bullet he guessed that the wrangler had relieved him of that menace. He settled down to his business.

After that, everything seemed to happen at once. He heard the pound of running feet above his own carefully spaced shots that were checking the rush on that end. Then guns were blasting from the back windows. Men were shouting from the other side, the sound moving along with an abrupt outburst of rippling sixgun fusillade. Brett sprang to his feet, snapping shots at running figures, careless of aim but adding to the rout. The firing slackened, then ceased altogether with the exception of an occasional rifleshoot at fleeing horsemen.

Brett met Bat Gourlay at a little distance from the house.

"Near's I've reckoned," the big man rumbled, "we got 'bout six dead ones and a couple can't walk nor ride—but can talk, by dam'. More'n that, son, I'm sheriff ontill someone takes this star offen me, an' I'm goin' to clean this mess to the gizzards. Boys found some hosses, range hitched, and there's Standin' S iron on 'em. Whosomever calls hisself man'ging boss of the spread'll talk to me."

"Who does?"

"Wall, they's a feller, Alf Simmons, was put in as ranch manager by Guy Fearin' when old Dan let go the reins. Simmons is half-Mex, half-Injun and whole skunk. He could be at th' bottom o' this."

"Alone?" Brett asked softly.

"What we got to find out son. An' we got to be movin'."

"If I was sheriff," Brett said, "I'd kinder want the whole story before I made the roundup."

"Look ahyar, Brett. You've growed up but you ain't changed. I'll take your word and save us a hull lot o' time."

"Sure—but not my guess, huh, Bat?"

The sheriff peered around. "Hi-yah, Shed!" he bellowed. An answering call came. "My foreman," Bat explained. "Outa the old Standin' S. Reckon you knowed him."

Brett turned his back, moved a few steps away and built a smoke. The man came running up.

"Shed," Bat instructed him, "round up ever'thing you can find—dead and live ones. Tell the folks inside their trouble's over. Coupla the boys got nicked an' you can fix 'em up. I'm ridin' out a piece."

"Say, Bat," the man said in a pleasing voice, "how come you tote that star? I didn't see it before."

"I'm sheriff, by dam'," Bat Gourlay boomed, "an' you can tell the boys that. An', Shed, you can tell 'em, too, we're ridin' the hull damned S outfit 'fore the night's through."

A THREE-QUARTER moon was well above the Mesa rim when the two men dropped reins over their horses' heads, as they swung afoot, and pushed through the aspens, Brett Standing leading. The dried leaves made whispering sounds against their chaps.

Bat Gourlay swore. "Don't wonder they call this place ha'nted. Kinder spooky with this moon an' all."

"It's got a ghost all right," Brett said grimly. He swung the sagging door wider then paused by the jamb to scratch a match, allowing the big sheriff to push past him.

Bat breathed a mighty oath. "Keep those matches burnin', son, and hold 'em a little closer." He pointed out what his keen eyes noted. "Shot from behind plum' through the head." One arm indicated the western window in whose single remaining pane a small, round hole appeared. Bat's glance came back to the skeleton. "That shot couldn't have been made in the dark. Feller knew who he was shootin'. Left him to lay where he fell."

He straightened and looked hard at Brett who absently lit another match from the one that was fading.

"And 'cordin' to story that was told," Bat rumbled. "Except for one thing, son. That ain't you lyin' there. Who th' hell was it?"

Brett stooped with his flaring match,

pointed to the ring on the finger bone, then slipped it off, held it a moment for Bat to see and dropped it in his pocket.

"I wanted someone besides myself to see where this was, Bat. It was my ring. It ain't likely the feller lookin' through the window saw it, 'though he could in daylight, mebbe. But he could see this all right."

He reached for the shred of buckskin shirt he'd examined on his former visit and his match went out. He fumbled for another and his fingers found only one. By its light he saw a larger piece that had escaped his notice where it had lain outside the shaft of light from the window. It was a part of the front with the breast pocket, and as he picked it up he felt something crumbled inside.

Brett dropped his almost extinguished match, thrust fingers into the pocket and encountered a folded bit of paper.

"Scratch a light, Bat," he said into the darkness. "I used my last one."

After a moment of fumbling, the sheriff swore. "I ain't got nary a one, Brett. Le's get outa here. I got me a kinder story anyway."

Moonlight, screened by the growth, yet showed the dim outline of the doorway. Stepping carefully the two went out. Away from bushes, Brett drew the paper from the pocket, unfolded it and made out only the faint impression of penciled writing which the moonlight failed to make legible even to a word. Bat watched him curiously.

"What you got there, son?"

"I dunno. It might tell us just who that feller was, and it might mean nothing. We'll see when we get to light." He folded the paper carefully and placed it in the pocket with the ring, then held the piece of shirt for Bat to see.

"That was my old buckskin shirt," he said. "Was mighty proud of it when I was a kid here. Only one like it round here. Indian made it for me special."

"Yeah? That tell you who's the feller in there?"

"Anyone could have stole it," Brett said slowly. "But there was only one feller would have borrowed it and only one I'd lent the ring to."

"Damn it, Brett, who the hell was it?"

"You sort of figger that out, Bat. Had to be a mighty good friend of mine, way I

felt 'bout that ring. A few hours ago, this girl Barbara told me another feller disappeared same time I did, and she says he ain't never been heard of since."

"There was two of you kids, always together," the sheriff said slowly. "One fightin' for the other at the drop o' the hat, an' you mostly doin' it, seein' the other feller was sorter peaceable an' never even toted a gun. That would be young Bob Fearin', an' he ain't been seen or heard from, for all I know, since you lit out. Guy swore he shot you, for shootin' the old man. . . . Good Lord—his own brother!"

Brett folded the piece of shirt and put it away. "I was only a little taller than Bob," he said. "And he was wearing my shirt."

"That shootin' had to be in daylight," Bat said gruffly. "Le's get ridin'."

THEY swept down into the hollow of Bar B's home ranch and pulled rein at the last of the cottonwood strip where two men were hunkered smoking cigarettes. They promptly got to their feet and one stepped close to the sheriff.

"You toll off Jack Benson an' Rolfe to stick 'round here, Shed," Bat instructed him, "to wait for the Doc an' coroner. Jack and Rolfe both stopped lead an' won't be no good to us shootin'. Git up the rest of the fellers."

"Say, Bat," Shed said, and there was more than a tinge of sarcasm in his tone, "feller come tearin' up here coupla minutes ago, all lathered up. Cussin' hell to break-fast. Swore he was goin' to fire the rest o' the Standin' S hands soon he got back to town."

"That would be Guy Fearin', huh?"

"Sure. Gone 'long in to pacify Miss Barb'ra and her brother. We done wrong lettin' him in?"

"Now ain't that jus' sweet," Bat grumbled. He swung down and tossed the reins to Shad. "Come 'long, son," he said to Brett, who had also dismounted. "We'll get him to tell us a story."

They mounted the porch steps softly, for the sound of angry, excited voices had broken on their ears. They crept along the porch toward the door that was slightly ajar.

"That's a lie, Fearing," they heard Alec Bradley cry out. "You can't fool me, and you can't fool Barbara. This never could

have happened, or that attempt to hang me, if you hadn't known about it. These are your men—and they do what you tell them. You want me out of the way, so you think you can run off with Barbara. Let me tell you something—she'd kill herself first."

"I can't help your suspicions, Alec," Guy Fearing said silkily, "as much as they hurt me. I can only repeat that I mean the best for you two. But—" and his voice suddenly got hard—"no man can call me a liar and get away with it. If it wasn't for Barbara I would blast you right now."

Bat whispered: "You stay here a mite. I don't want you in this just yet, an' I don't want you to do any lead throwin'." He pushed through the door and called to Guy Fearing: "Now, now, take it easy. An' take your hand off that gun, Fearin'!"

Brett moved up and leaned against the jamb where the door was left a little open. The only one he could see was the girl, standing steadily erect, her dark eyes stirred with emotion. Then the sheriff came into his view.

"Where the hell did you get that star, Gourlay?" Guy Fearing demanded. "You have no right to it—and you can't bluff me with it, if that's what is in your mind."

"There's two things, son," Bat rumbled, "that counts with ever' lawman, an' one ain't much good without the other. One is this," his left hand tapped the star, "an' t'other's this." His right hand slapped the big Colt. "Now seein' I got 'em both an' the right to ask, there's things I've long time been curious 'bout."

"Go ahead and spill it," Fearing said, "if that's the only way to get rid of you. Although I'll tell you that as soon as I get back to town I'll have you arrested for impersonating an officer."

"Fair enough," Bat said pleasantly. "Now, 'bout seven years ago Dan Standin' was shot one night an' you told folks you chased the killer and shot him—an' that he was young Brett Standing."

"That's right," Guy said wearily.

"That was out yonder a piece, huh?—place called Forbidden Mesa 'count of old Dan forbidin' anyone to go out that away?"

"Out on the mesa rim, beyond the chapel, yes."

"Sure it was Brett who did the shooting and it was him you shot?"

Fearing sighed resignedly. "Of course. Sure as you can be of anyone pulling a gun on you and trying to kill you first. I wanted to bring him back and let others punish him."

"You saw him shoot his father, huh? Why didn't you cut down on him then?"

"I haven't the slightest idea why you're bringing this all up again after all these years," Guy said in a tone of wearied patience. "Everyone else knows it. I heard the shot, Brett came rushing from his father's room. No one else was around. I went in to see what was wrong and found Mr. Standing shot and unconscious. I hurried out, saw Brett saddling and gave chase. As a matter of fact, he confessed the shooting to me when I cornered him by the line shack on the mesa."

Bat spoke in a low, drawing voice. "Seein' I only been sheriff again for a coupla hours, I been right busy. Already I got a coupla witnesses what says you're plumb lyin', Fearin'."

"Damn you, be careful of your language," Fearing warned.

"Oh, please," Barbara cried, "haven't there been enough men killed around here tonight!"

"I'm sorry, Barbara, but I don't take that from any man."

"Plumb lyin'," Bat repeated steadily. "What become of your brother, Bob?" he asked suddenly.

"I have never known. He ran away that same night. Why—you aren't suggesting that Bob shot Uncle Dan? That I wouldn't believe!"

Tom W. Blackburn, whose Juan Poker yarn is in this issue, has a dramatic and amusing novelette coming up in the next issue. You 10 STORY WESTERN fans can easily guess the name of the brass-tongued, iron-fisted, trigger-quick old gent who will have the leading role. Right! Christian Defever . . . Watch your favorite newsstand for "Derringer Diplomat" in December 10 STORY WESTERN—on sale at your favorite newsstand on November 10th!

"No," Bat said. "Never a-tall. Bob wouldn't shoot anyone. He never toted a gun and after all these years he ain't wearin' one now."

"What the hell you getting at?" Guy demanded hoarsely.

"My two witnesses. One ain't livin' no more but he tells a powerful story just the same. An' both together says you never shot Brett Standin'."

CHAPTER

"Here's Brett!"

5

"How could I be mistaken?" Guy said, as if puzzled. Then he gave a short, harsh laugh. "You're trying to make something out of this, using me as a goat to get back as sheriff. Well, you can't prove a damned thing!"

"No? Mebbe I couldn't, but—" he put his hand on the door edge—"here's a feller got something to say 'bout it." He swung the door wide.

Brett hated to make his entrance like that; as if it were a cue for him to appear on the stage. He was puzzled, too, why Bat had wanted it worked that way. He walked in and, concerned as he had a right to be, over Guy Fearing, his first glance was at Barbara.

He saw her start and the quick smile on her face as she looked into his eyes. Then the smile was as quickly gone and an almost hurt look appeared in its place, as if a disagreeable thought had come to her abruptly. But he couldn't afford to watch her any longer. He faced Guy Fearing.

Fearing's eyes were a little wild. His right hand stole slowly nearer his side. "I thought I saw behind that frowzy beard. How are you, Brett, would-be father killer?"

"Why did you have to shoot Bob?" Brett asked softly.

"Oh," Barbara cried out suddenly, "can't this all be stopped right now? You, Mr. Fearing, or your people seem to want our range again. You can have it. Alec and I are going away."

"Well, now, Ma'am," Bat Gourlay spoke placidly into the moment's silence, "I wouldn't be too sudden 'bout makin' your mind up on that. We got a right nice country 'round here, when things quiet

down. And, Ma'am, I ain't talked so much for a dog's age. Wish you'd show me where I can get a drink o' water."

"But we can't leave those two like that," Barbara breathed. And, oddly perhaps, her eyes were only on Brett.

"Shucks," Bat said imperturbably. "I reckon they got only a few things to say to each other. Then we'll mosey 'long."

A light sparkled in Guy Fearing's eyes as the big sheriff stamped heavily after Barbara's light footsteps, and he was sneering as he attempted to stare down Brett's steady look. Alec Bradley still stood at one side, forgotten, unarmed, his hands clenching and unclenching, apparently some desperate purpose working in his mind but indecisive as to what he could do.

"I asked you," Brett repeated, in even lower tone, "why you had to shoot Bob."

"You're crazy and a liar as you always were! I didn't—but if I had, why in hell should I? You tell me."

"Mebbe," Brett said slowly, "Bob has told me that. I found a note in his pocket a little while ago." He reached toward his pocket with his right hand.

Guy Fearing, tensed, watching like a hawk, waited until Brett's fingers were within the pocket. Then his own hand darted the few inches it had to go to the butt of his pistol. He drew.

Brett, for a flashing instant, questioned if, in his overconfidence, he had made a fatal mistake.

Fearing's gun spurted flame and smoke. But even as the lead ploughed into the floor, Fearing was blasted backward. The mighty roar from the kitchen door shook the room.

In its fading sound, Barbara screamed. The next instant she rushed past the lumbering sheriff, a hand to her throat. She stopped abruptly, as she saw Brett standing there, unharmed—no gun in his hand.

Brett turned his head and smiled at her.

Bat Gourlay came over, looked at the proof of his marksmanship and turned to Brett, saying:

"A hell of a sheriff I am, son. But I just didn't want folks sayin' you ever shot ary one of your relatives."

"You son of a gun," Brett said softly. "So you rigged it this way from the start."

"I reckon I had to," Bat said mournfully. "But we got a lot o' messes to clear

up in town, son. So let us get goin'."

Barbara came to Brett and faced him squarely, her vivid eyes steady on his. "Tell me," she said, "just to me. Did you shoot your father?"

Brett shook his head slowly. "I loved my father," he said. "Is that answer enough?"

"It is," she said and turned away before he had more than the briefest glimpse of the sudden light in her eyes. He caught her arm.

"I don't know what that man ever meant to you," he said quietly, "but I should tell you that it was his own brother he killed over yonder. More than that, Alec was right. His men could never have done these things unless he knew it and ordered it."

"He never meant anything to me," Barbara said quietly, "except for what influence I could have on him to spare Alec." Then she added: "I knew you instantly without the beard, even your voice outside the window. But you were wounded!"

"Just a spent bullet. Nothing at all."

Bat-Gourlay boomed: "Come on; come on."

"Wait a minute," Barbara called. "Can't we go in with you? Staying here tonight with all these—"

"Sure, sure, Ma'am."

Bat turned to Brett while sister and brother were getting a few things from the next room. "There's a question, son, I been aimin' to ask you for right some time. You an' Dan did have a row that night, didn't you?"

Brett glanced briefly at the still figure on the floor. "Guy cursed my father to me. I whaled hell out of him. Dad saw how his face was smashed, took his side—and used the quirt on me. I beat it."

"An' him a growed man an' you nothing but a kid," said Bat.

"I reckon I was mad, Bat. I must have got away fast. I never heard a shot. Never suspected a thing was wrong until I came home—to this hell-mess."

BRETT stood with Alec Bradley and his sister in the corridor of the hotel, peering through the rear doorway toward the

little group at the round table up front. The group had been interrupted in their poker by the abrupt entrance of Bat Gourlay with the star on his bulging chest.

Old Tom Mott spied Brett and the Bradleys, came over and addressed himself to Brett. "You folks wantin' anything?"

"A coupla rooms later on," Brett said absently.

"There's been hell raised 'round here," Mott went on, "but those jaspers up there wouldn't stop their poker if they was an earthquake or cyclone tearin' loose. Seems a feller, 'bout your height, mister, but with a heavy beard, killed a Standin' S rider over to Tony's, then stole the star offen Sheriff Haines. And, I swan, that same guy was in to dinner right here."

"I reckon he's left town by now," Brett said. "Lissen."

Bat Gourlay had shoved cards and chips aside indiscriminately and was leaning forward rapping his big knuckles on the table for emphasis.

"Daniel," he boomed, "you been a stubborn ol' fool all these years, and it's 'bout time somebody told you so to your face."

Dark eyes looked up at him from under grizzled brows. "How come you're totin' that star, Bat?" Daniel Standing queried sourly.

"Sho, ain't you heard? Jeff Haines was fired some time ago for sinful neglect of duty and I was 'pointed in his place. And that reminds me." He turned to a bald-headed, stocky man with long gray beard. "Seein' I'm 'pointed, to make it reg'lar, Judge, you can swear me in." He raised his right hand.

Judge Hiller, with a smile at the rest and meeting no objections, repeated the oath.

Bat mumbled all he could of it, then heaved a heavy sigh. "Well, I reckon that clears me of all the sins I been committin' lately."

"So now you may explain your remark to me," Dan Standing said coldly.

"An' right glad to do it," Bat responded promptly. "Seems like, all this time you been reckonin' you had a lowdown, coyote of a son who'd shoot his own father. Well, I'm honin' to tell you Brett never done it."

"Then who did?" Doc Wilson snapped. "The feller Dan's been cottonin' to all these years, runnin' his place to hell."

"Guy Fearing?" Judge Hiller gasped. "Have you any proof of this, man?"

Brett, watching, could not see that his father moved at all, except for the switching of his eyes from Gourlay to the judge and back.

"Supposin' you read this here to the gentlemen," Bat said, and handed to the judge a crumpled paper. Judge Hiller bent over it, cleared his throat and began to read:

"Brett: I chased you and hoped to catch you but my horse stepped in a gopher hole. I'm holed up here in the line shack with a sprained ankle. I'm writing this now in case I can't get to you and have to send it to you wherever you are. I'm never going to return to the ranch and hope to join you sometime. Guy shot Uncle Dan and he knows that I saw him do it. I was going in to tell Uncle Dan that Guy should have had the quirt and not you but I was too late. I don't understand how Guy could be that bad but I hope never to see him again . . . Bob."

Brett saw his father's hand raise slowly to his eyes and cover them. He was starting impulsively forward when a light hand on his arm restrained him.

"Let Mr. Gourlay finish it first," Barbara whispered.

Judge Hiller, after a glance at old Dan, slapped his hand on the table and sprang to his feet. "On that evidence—" he began. "Where did you get this, Bat?"

"Out of a skeleton's pocket in the shack on Forbidden Mesa."

"Brett's? No—it couldn't be, then. Bob Fearing? My Lord! Then I must issue a warrant immediately for Guy's arrest. You will execute it, Sheriff."

"'Tain't necess'ry," the sheriff stated. "Sentence has already been imposed and executed."

"Meaning—what?"

"Well, the crim'nal, faced down with the proof of his crime, drew a gun an' was 'bout to shoot Brett when, in the exercise o' my bounded duty, I had to do some shootin' myself."

Old Dan Standing was leaning forward. "You say he was about to shoot my son? Then—Brett—"

Bat Gourlay turned his head.

"Brett Standin'!" he roared. "You anywhere hereabouts?"

Little Doc Wilson shoved his meager stack of chips into the center, swept all the others and cards together, then joined the judge, Bat Gourlay and the rancher at the door.

Barbara watched until she saw Brett stop before his father, saw his hand start out hesitantly then the grip as two hands met. Then she turned her head away.

After a while, they all drifted back to the table.

Old Dan was planning things. "Brett's cleaning out the no-good hands that've crawled in while I been asleep. Now, Bat, while you're sheriffing you'll be no good as a rancher. We'll take over your hands and run your spread 'long with the Standin' S. Hum. I sort of wish Brett had all the old range like I had it and meant he should some time."

"Well, now, Dan," Bat Gourlay rumbled, "if you'll jus' be patient and kinder let things run 'long by theirselves, sech as lettin' nature take its course, I shouldn't be a-tall surprised sooner or later you'll be countin' Bar B stock as well."

Brett got one brief look at Barbara's eyes before she averted them. But he could still look at the flush on her tanned cheeks and Alec Bradley's wide smile. Old Dan was smiling at the girl.

"I reckon mebbe you'll be needin' my hands anyway, Dan," Bat Gourlay said. "We just come back from Tony's. He says what's left of your crowd's all caboosed, Alf Simmons, Jim an' the rest. An' they took fat Haines 'long with 'em."

Doc Wilson rapped bony knuckles on the table. "Before I run out to see to Bat's casualties, like he just told me I ought to, I want to say one thing." He pointed a long finger at the older Standing. "Bat called you a stubborn old fool, Dan, and I'm repeating it. Just after you were shot, seven years back, I told you a little fixing of that upper vertebra would take the pressure off the nerve, let you ride a horse and make you 'bout as good as new. Would you let me do it? Like hell!"

Old Dan looked long at Brett. "I kind of reckon I would like to fork a horse again."

SATAN'S GUN TRYST

By

FRANK BONHAM

Rancher Andy Coleman could double-cross his friendly neighbors and become rich—or stick his neck into a hangman's haunting loop!

FROM the big oak tree in front of Andy Coleman's cabin, the view of Spaniards' Mesa was an impressive one—unless a man happened to have unpleasant memories about it. Andy Coleman had hoped Sheriff Kemp would leave right after lunch. But it was three o'clock now and the sheriff seemed to have nothing better to do than to smoke and talk and watch the shadows spill like dark-red paint down the pipe-organ palisades.

"You've got the prettiest view and the best range of any cowman in the county," the sheriff said. "Funny you don't seem to prosper here."

"Maybe it's because I'm a first-rate cow-hand and a third-rate business-man."

There was nothing mysterious about his failing to make a go of ranching, Andy thought. Knowing how to raise cows, and understanding how to make money out of them—were two different things. Nobody in Yavapai County raised better cattle than Andy. But somehow he never seemed to sell his cattle when beef was up, or else he signed some fool contract that made him pay shipping charges. He loved working with a horse but he hated wrangling a pencil. That was why the Bar LY was on the skids.

★ ★ ★

He was afraid to look up or down. . . .



Sheriff Kemp puffed his pipe and let the breeze carry the smoke up into the blue New Mexico sky. "No man that rode against Jeb Stuart and come through Snickers Gap is going to let a run of hard luck whip him."

Andy Coleman had a moment's pride in the old days, when he had been a trooper in the Sixth. That was work he understood, riding hard and swinging a saber, living for the day at hand. Once he had thought the words on his discharge papers meant something: "*Participated in twenty-four battles and skirmishes, serving his country courageously and faithfully until honorably discharged.*"

But all they signified was that he knew how to hold up his end of a battle.

"Tangling with Jeb Stuart was another kind of fighting, Billy," he told Kemp.

Billy Kemp's eyes found his. "You may have to do some more of that kind of fighting yet, Andy. You remember that fellow, Henry Quitman? Hydraulic man that tried to get your Coldwater Canyon range condemned? Well, he's back."

Andy shrugged. "Is that bad? I still own the land."

"That's just the point. Lee Slaughter has made a deal with him. Slaughter claims Coldwater Canyon is on his land. That Spaniards' Mesa ain't your northwest boundary at all. He says it's Cap Rock. And he's giving Quitman placer rights on Coldwater Creek. They aim to spoil half a county of grassland for some low-grade ore."

Some strings of worry were tugging at Andy Coleman's mind. Some coals were being stirred that might break into flame, and he was suddenly on the alert, watching every step he made.

"That's easy enough settled," he told the sheriff. "We'll ride up there and prove there's no boundary stake on Cap Rock."

Kemp knocked out his pipe on his heel. He was a powerfully built man with a clipped, gray-black beard. His thinking was precise and unhurried.

"I thought of that," he said. "I just rode up with Slaughter and Quitman. There's a cement stake in a rock with a copper spike in it. It's my guess that the cement isn't six month's old. But the only way to prove it is to find the marker on the mesa."

Andy thought: *There's a marker on*

Spaniards Mesa, too. And old Spanish marker, with a bronze coin in it. I know, because I saw it—the night Red Lubbock disappeared.

Andy Coleman wanted to tell him that. But Lee Slaughter's face was grinning through space at him. Andy remembered what Slaughter had said that night six years ago: "I and you, Andy, had better forget that I ever found the trail to the top of the mesa. If anybody comes up here and finds Red, it'll mean a rope around your neck for sure."

That was what happened when a man got to thinking too heavy about easy money. It was the way a lot of men's minds had been running back there just after the War—when they were finding it tough to hang onto the ranches their army landscrip had given them. Some of the men who had sat back and sold beef and mules to the army during the War had made fortunes by lending money to the veterans and then foreclosed on their land.

George Trimble had been one of them. But the country had grown a little uncomfortable for him, and eventually he sold everything he had and prepared to move back to the States. The night before he left, Lee Slaughter and Red Lubbock had come to Andy with a big plan.

Andy had been sore enough to let himself be talked into it. They had planned to relieve old George of his ill-gotten gains.

But no rough stuff; no shooting. That had been Andy's only stipulation.

But afterwards, when they divided the money up on Spaniards' Mesa, Red Lubbock had boasted about the way he'd taken the driver with a shot through the belly, and George Trimble the moment he'd poked his head out the window.

Andy knew then that he'd been jobbed. He'd got to raging and swearing, and before they knew it Red had thrown down on him. In the fight, Andy had gotten hold of the redhead's gun and twisted it so that Red's own bullet had gone through him.

Andy hadn't known how close they were to the edge of the cliff—until Red had taken one step back and disappeared. And when he'd disappeared, Andy's gun had disappeared, too, because Red Lubbock had twisted it out of Andy's holster during the fracas.

Red's body—at least his skeleton and

clothes—was still up there, on the ledge which had caught him halfway down. And in his hand, the last time Andy had seen him, was Andy's old army gun, which had a number on it that was charged out to him in the War Department files.

Red was still up there, because there was nothing to tie a rope to on that bare mesatop, and neither Andy nor Lee Slaughter was going to slide down a rope two hundred feet long while the other held it.

All Andy ever got out of that holdup was experience, because he wanted no part of that kind of money. . . .

SHERIFF KEMP stared across the valley which sloped away from the cabin to a deep slot at the foot of the mesa. "Strikes me," he said, "that there ought to be a trail up there somewheres."

"I've been over every foot of it on cowhunts," Andy stated. "There isn't a trail a bird would risk his life on."

Kemp sucked at his dry pipe. "There's some talk about this hydraulic mining thing. Some of the ranchers along Coldwater Creek want to join up with you in a league to fight them. Not because they're so big-hearted—but you can see what happens to them when Quitman starts his monitors spraying. Their cattle won't drink the water because it's as thick as cream. The river bed rises and half of their range is a swamp during the wet seasons. It happened in California, and the ranchers and farmers were ruined by the time the legislature got around to passing laws."

"I know," Andy said. "You can tell the boys they won't do any mining while I'm here. But I don't go in much for leagues and such."

Billy Kemp furnished relief to Andy's edgy nerves by finally putting on his hat. He said, "Sure. But don't go to sleep on the job. And call on me if you need any help. I'll do all I can without stepping outside the law."

A nice policy, Andy thought. His palms wouldn't be sweating now, if he'd always followed it himself.

That night he slept with a grisly bedmate called fear. In the morning he hung around the cabin, although there was plenty of work to be done, with the weaning roundup coming up.

He did not realize what he was doing

until suddenly he looked down and found he had been splicing every odd piece of rope around the place to make a single length.

You won't get out of it that easy, he told himself. It was two hundred feet down that mesa cliff, and there was no kind of projection that he could tie the rope to.

Then he got to thinking about Elly, and he knew he was being a still greater fool. Elly wouldn't be marrying a broken-down rancher who was going broke on the best grass in New Mexico. A man like Walt Baylor was the kind for Elly. Walt had a few sections of perpendicular mountain range five miles up Coldwater Canyon, and on this tough and inhospitable range he had been able to double his stock in the two years he'd been here. Pretty soon Elly could quit her teaching job and learn about ranching.

With sudden decision he threw the rope in the harness shed. He saddled his buckskin and rode down the canyon to start working out some of the wilder stuff in the brush pockets.

For Andy Coleman, the edge had never gone off this country. His winter pastures were mountainous, climbing back from the foot of Spaniards' Mesa in a series of ascending ranges. The bottomlands were meadows linked by creeks which disappeared only in the driest years.

Around noon an old cow with her calf went plunging through the brush past him. Ordinarily he would have headed them up a side canyon where he could pick them up later. But right now he wanted to know what had sent them running up the canyon.

Andy had ridden only a few hundred yards down the creek when he heard the ring of a hammer. He came around a bend and saw Lee Slaughter and a fleshy man in a white Stetson setting an iron stake on the bank. They were across the creek from him. As he put his pony through the rushing stream, they straightened up and were waiting for him when he dismounted.

SLAUGHTER was about Andy's age, but he packed a lot of excess weight around the middle. He had always had plenty of punchers to do the hard work for him. He was dark-haired, with a dominant nose and straight black brows, and his mouth smiled easily, but Andy had seen it when it was ugly and ruthless.

Slaughter said: "Long time no see, Andy."

"Not long enough," Andy told him. "You figuring on putting up a tent?"

Slaughter laughed. "You still got a sense of humor, even if you can't run cattle. I guess Kemp gave you the story, didn't he?"

"What he knew of it," Andy said. "How much does your buddy, here, know?"

Quitman was a tall, fair-haired man with pinched blue eyes in a narrow face. Andy guessed he didn't get out of his office much, because his skin was badly sunburned. Quitman wore tan whipcord breeches and lace boots and a new corduroy jacket. He smiled, his eyes squinting up still more, and he said:

"I know about Red Lubbock."

"Then I can talk free," Andy said. "You're not going any farther with this ringer than to pound stakes. You can pull out as soon as you want."

Slaughter sat down on the sand and glanced up at the corrugated walls that went up a sheer five hundred feet. Then he looked at Andy. "I'll tell you what we're going to do," he said. "We're going to build a dam right on this spot. We're going to run a flume down the canyon for the monitors and wash out more money every week than you make in a year."

"And what am I going to do?" Andy asked.

Henry Quitman answered him. "Since you'll be getting a six percent cut out of the profits," he said, "you're going to run your cows the same as usual and keep quiet. We're not trying to rob you. This is a more or less worthless slice of land we're taking, and we're giving good money in return for it."

"Have you thought about the men on Coldwater Creek?" Andy asked Slaughter. Slaughter shrugged. "They'll get by."

Andy said: "You bet they will. Because I'll be looking out for their interests as well as mine. And I'm telling you to make some hoofprints."

He stood there with his thumbs hooked under his belt, a hard and narrow length of man without any compromise in his face. He had a horseman's flat hips and the big, scarred fingers of a roper.

Lee Slaughter got up, a hardness arising in his face. But again it was Quitman, the talker, who made answer.

"Ever play chess?" he asked Andy. "A man can learn a lot about fighting from it. For instance, you move out a piece that says we aren't going to take any gold out of Coldwater Canyon. But we counter with one that says you'll hang if we don't."

"But there's something else called a stalemate," Andy told him.

He didn't have to explain the remark. Both of them knew that if Andy hung they were cut out of the Coldwater Canyon placers for good, because he would tell about the marker.

Slaughter paused before him on the way to his horse. "You're gambling with some boys who play for keeps," he said. "Better think about it."

Andy said: "I have thought about it. And I'm sorry I didn't do this a long time ago."

His fist came up hard, tagging Slaughter on the jaw and dumping him on the sand. Slaughter groaned and rolled over on his stomach with his face in his hands. He didn't get up immediately.

When Andy rode off Henry Quitman had Slaughter on his back and was saying, "Take it easy, boy. Take it easy."

Andy felt better. He hadn't made his position any worse, and he felt as warm inside as though he had just killed a bottle of Scotch. . . .

The next morning Walt Baylor stopped by just as Andy was finishing his fried spuds and salt pork. Walt, the neighbor who could make ranching pay, was heading for Yavapai with a pack horse. "Better come along," he told Andy. "We'll be too busy next month to get down. If your grub bin's as empty as mine, you'll likely starve." Then he said off-handedly, "I guess you knew Elly's in town for the summer."

"That's right," Andy said. He had forgotten about school closing last week. Elly Stuart boarded with the Roberts' on Christmas Creek during the school months, but in summer she was always ready to desert her blackboard and maps and spend a few months in town. "I guess you're right," he said. "I'll catch out a pack horse."

They rode down the canyon trail, cutting east where the Coldwater spilled into the valley. Walt never talked much, seemingly always concerned with what he was going to do on the ranch next week. He was older than Andy, about thirty-five, a dark-skinned, sober man.

Walt ran every cow to the acre that he could, and he studied the Breeder's Gazette to learn what strains were coming into vogue and what the Chicago packers were buying. He made a profit, but on a ranch the size of his no man could make over a thousand a year.

They left their animals picketed along the creek behind the general store and went up to Mrs. Nealy's, where Elly boarded. Elly was on the porch in a cool summer dress, helping the older woman make the ties on a quilt, when Andy and Walt came up the walk. Mrs. Nealy excused herself to see about lunch.

"I thought you boys never would come down," Elly said, smiling impartially at each of them.

"Pretty busy," Andy said. He glanced at his feet and then, when she wasn't looking, stared at her with a hunger he couldn't keep out of his eyes.

She was like a tiny piece of china in his grandmother's china closet. Something to be taken care of, but sometimes surprisingly tough, because of quality. Her skin was clear, with fresh coloring. She was wearing her blonde hair in a knot low on her neck, the way the ladies were supposed to be wearing them in New York.

Finally Elly said, "Mrs. Kemp was saying there's some trouble about your title, Andy."

"It'll blow over," Andy said. "Lee Slaughter thought he could scare me out."

Walt grunted. "You never told me about it."

"Why bother you?" Andy said.

"If there's any trouble in the canyon, I want to know about it," Walt told him. "I'm pretty well satisfied with my neigh-

bors. I'll string with them against any boundary jumper like Slaughter."

Andy had no answer. It was Elly who suddenly said, "Isn't it about time you two boys discovered something I've known for a year?"

IT WAS a complete surprise to Andy Coleman. But in Walt's face he thought he saw comprehension, as though he and Elly had talked this thing over.

"What's your discovery?" Andy asked her.

Elly linked her fingers in her lap, frowning at them, and then she looked at Andy as though he were an overgrown, not too bright student she was trying to be patient with.

"I mean that both of you are good ranchers. But you're failing, Andy, because you don't watch all the corners. Walt is having a struggle because he hasn't enough land. It looks to me like a partnership is called for, if one ever was."

Walt Baylor stroked his long nose with his forefinger. "That's a new angle," he said. "It would grade up with me, but I don't know about Andy."

Suddenly Andy Coleman saw how it would be. They'd make money, maybe, but Elly and all the rest of the county would know how it was because of Walt's savvy and not his. Pretty soon he'd be a silent partner. And pretty soon Elly would make up her mind between them, and it wouldn't be his ring she was wearing.

But there was another angle, too, and that was the one he mentioned.

"There's going to be trouble, Walt—a lot of trouble. I'm not asking anybody else to get shot up to save my bacon. After this

TEST SIGHT

TASTE RIGHT

If the ladder is placed against building, how far up will it reach?



ANSWER,

It will reach exactly to the top of the building.



thing is settled, maybe. But not for awhile."

They both looked at him. Elly's lips pressed in, then she looked away.

Walt shook his head. "It's your say. That's no reason but I won't argue about it."

They left right after lunch. Andy felt uncomfortable, as though he had been guilty of selfishness. By saying the word, he could have helped out a man who needed a boost. But where Elly was concerned, he had his own axe to grind. It was all muddled, anyhow. Why make plans for ten years from now when the world was about to end as far as he was concerned, anyway?

Andy and Walt ran across Sheriff Kemp having lunch at the Mountain View. They had a cup of coffee with him. Andy felt tight all through, locked in a cold tension that was growing every hour, and suddenly he knew there was only one road he could take. It was the one that took him away from Elly; away from everything he had spent nearly half his life-time trying to build. But it also took him away from a hang-rope—so long as he kept on the move.

"This will be good news to the boys on Coldwater Creek," he told the sheriff. "I got to grubbing around in the brush after you left, and danged if I didn't find a trail to the top of Spaniards' Mesa!"

Billy Kemp said: "By hokey, I knew there must be one!"

With the handle of a knife, Andy began to draw on the speckled table-cloth. He didn't have to imagine anything; he had the whole thing in his memory to draw on.

"The trail comes out on the bluff right above the canyon," he told them. "Right in the center of the mesa a hole's been dug and some kind of cement poured in, with a big bronze coin in the top of it."

Billy Kemp struck one hairy fist against his palm. "This will wind Lee Slaughter's clock! If he opens his yap after this, I'll have him in Santa Fe before you can say aidin' and abettin'!"

"Can you come up tonight and look at it?" Andy asked him.

"This is Saturday. I've got to hang around for the cantina brawl. We wouldn't make it before dark, anyway. I'll start early and see you by noon tomorrow." He began to cram tobacco into his pipe. "Wait! I throw this at the gold-dust twins!" he said.

It was when they were nearing the cabin, just before sundown, that Walt said: "I sorta hope Billy didn't spring it on them today. They're ambitious gents, Andy. A man could still pry that coin out and deface the marker. And maybe you wouldn't be around to tell about it."

Andy grinned and slapped him on the shoulder. "You think too much, Walt."

"I hope so," Walt said. . . .

It would be like this, Andy thought: He would steer sheriff Billy Kemp over to the marker and hang one on him before he knew what was happening. That would give him time to get back to his getaway horse, which would be hidden in the brush. By the time they found Red Lubbock's skeleton, he would well be on his way to Mexico. Andy slept that night, worn out with trying to solve problems that had no solution.

* * *

In the morning he began to gather the things he would want to take with him. He found his title to the land and on the back of it wrote, *I hereby relinquish title to the Bar LY ranch to Eleanor Stuart for the sum of one dollar.* He put this in an envelope with Elly's name on it.

He was just finishing his bedroll when he heard the sound of a shot somewhere nearby. A few minutes later a claybank pony loped up the trail and Walt hit the ground.

Walt was excited and angry. He was yelling: "I told you they'd come, you thick-headed galoot! They're on the way up with two of Slaughter's gun-hands."

Andy reached for the carbine that hung by the door. "What are you doing down here?" he demanded.

"Taking care of you," Walt said shortly. "I figured they'd be through earlier. I spent the night in a manzanita clump beside the trail waiting for them. They didn't come by dawn, and then I guess I dozed. They weren't a hundred feet away when I heard them."

"They shot at you?"

"No. I shot over their heads to stop them. They were riding with their rifles out of the boots."

Andy said: "It's my fight, Walt. You can ride out the back way and go after Billy Kemp."

WALT swore. Half his attention seemed to be on the trail, and he spoke with iron urgency. "What do you think I waited for—to lead them up? We're neighbors. Try to understand that. Now, where do you want to meet them?"

Andy Coleman strode into the cabin and brought his bedroll. He stood in the sunlight with the roll over his shoulder and his Winchester in his hand. Suddenly he was happy. This was the kind of fighting he understood; he would not have missed it for anything.

"I'm going up on the mesa," he said. "I figure I can take care of them there—and do another job as well."

Two miles up the canyon they forded the creek and plunged into a jungle of gray wolf-willows. Spaniards' Mesa lifted like a solid block of rain-grooved adobe before them. Deep in the willows Andy dismounted and began to thrash through the thickets toward the base of the mesa. He carried the coil of rope over his shoulder. He subjected Walt to an exasperating ten-minute climb up a sliding talus slope of broken rocks that finally brought them to a deep fissure in the side of the mesa.

Fifty feet inside this slot a series of shallow steps led upward, carved by the hands of the Conquistadores centuries ago. A hundred-foot climb, and they were out of the slot and working along a trail that would have given a llama gray hairs. Farther along, two hundred breath-taking feet above the river, another run of steps lifted them straight up the side of the mesa.

It was just before they reached the top that a rifle slug dimpled the sandstone twenty feet from Andy's head. The crack of the rifle came much later. He did not attempt to find the sniper, but ran low along the trail until he gained one of the narrow gully-like passages that led the last twenty feet to the top.

For a while he and Walt lay on the hot stone fifty feet back, getting their breath. A high, free wind rushed across the flat top of Spaniards' Mesa, buffeting its dozen-odd mountain junipers. There was a rubble of wind-eroded rocks, but nothing large enough to hide a man.

Andy looked about. "I think our best bet is to lay for them on the trail. They could come out any one of those grooves, or four of them. If we go back a ways we

can pick 'em off as they come around that last bend."

As Walt started to get up Andy put a hand on his forearm. "Wait a minute, Walt," he said. "I'll tell you why I wanted to come up here. Would it change your mind about siding me if I told you I'm wanted for killing a man?"

Walt stared at him. "I thought you must have had something on your mind, the way you've gone about bucking them."

Andy Coleman told him the story. It's not that I feel guilty," he said, "because Red made me kill him, and I don't mind having that kind of blood on my hands. I wouldn't take any of the money, either. But I'd have a sweet time ever explaining that gun down there."

"We'll worry about that when the time comes," said Walt.

He had only started down the trail when a bullet exploded against the bluff and he was forced back. They knew, then, that their fight would be made right here. That one of the four men had stayed below to keep them penned up.

Andy worked the hammer of his carbine back and forth, studying. They had a hundred yards of the cliff edge to cover. Slaughter and Quitman and their compadre could start firing from points a hundred feet apart, taking them in a hopeless cross-fire. It was a tactical point as tough as any he had come up against in the cavalry.

There was one thing they could try, though. It would take some tophand marksmanship, but it was better than trying to fire in three directions at once.

Andy put Walt down near the south end of the mesa, about fifty feet in from the edge, and he assumed a similar point near the north end. Thus they could put what the army called an enfilading fire across the broken rim of the cliff.

He heard them on the trail, now; heard them halt to parley, and knew they were selecting their vantage point.

Lee Slaughter's voice bulled through the buzzing silence. "You don't want to go like Red did, do you, Coleman? I'm throwing you a paper Quitman's lawyer worked up. If you sign it, you get two thousand and I get the Bar LY. You've got ten minutes to sign it and bring it down."

Something flashed out of one of the rocky notches. A stone wrapped in a paper rolled

across the level sandstone floor. Andy did not give away his position by answering. He looked beyond the paper and saw Walt Baylor lying on his belly with his cheek against the stock of his carbine, his legs spread wide.

Andy began to count. He had not ticked off two minutes when they came out with their guns blazing.

SOMEHOW he had known they would work it that way: A simple little trick to bunch them together and throw them off-guard. Even a man who knew the paper was only a dodge might think he had ten minutes to wait.

They came out of the gullies and sprawled flat, beginning to fire in the direction of the paper even before they had seen their targets. Henry Quitman was nearest Andy, and Andy sat his head right on the top of his front sight and squeezed off his shot. Quitman's head dropped and his body began to writhe, not prettily.

Andy heard Walt fire. Walt jerked his shot off too hastily. It missed Lee Slaughter, so that Slaughter swung his gun to cover Walt just as the chap-clad gunman of Slaughter's turned his rifle on Andy.

Andy Coleman thought: *He's worth more than I am. This wasn't his lookout anyhow.* So he took his next aim at Lee Slaughter, trying to forget about the bullet in the cowpuncher's gun which was about to smash into his own body.

The carbine set back heavily against his shoulder. Lee Slaughter came up on his knees with his hands clasped over his side. He got one foot under him and then collapsed.

Andy levered another shell into his gun. He put exaggerated concentration into the act of taking aim, because it took his mind off the shot that was to come. Across the round trough of the sight he looked at the puncher. The man was very still. Maybe he had buck fever, Andy thought, and suddenly he was rushing to get off a shot while he still had time.

He heard Walt calling him. "Are you going to kick the poor guy when he's down?"

Not until then did Andy realize that Walt had fired at the same time as he; that Walt had fired at the cowpuncher. The man was already dead.

For a while they stood there among these men who had come looking for gold, and had found death. The wind moved strongly across Spaniards' Mesa from the valley, bringing them the sound of a voice somewhere below.

Walt said hastily: "That's Billy Kemp. Where's this skeleton, Andy?"

Andy walked to an eminence at the cliff edge, from which they could see the sheriff far below, at the foot of the trail. Billy Kemp's shouts were faint bleats. "Andy! You all right?"

Andy cupped his hands. "Okay, Sheriff! The trail's right ahead of you."

Kemp called back: "I know. I trailed 'em. I jumped another one down here and he cleared out." They could see him begin to work up through the rocks.

Andy pointed down. "Look."

Walt got on his hands and knees and stuck his head over, so that he could see the little bundle of rags on a ledge far below. There was the shine of bleached bones among them. Walt moved back. It was a heart-stopping vista, the river five hundred feet straight down.

Walt scratched his neck. "I—I guess he's bound to see them," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Andy smiled. "Sure he is. But I've got one more card to play, and you can help me. First I want you to promise me something. If I don't get back up, I want you to marry Elly, and soon. I reckon you'd win her, anyway. But I've left her the ranch, and with you to run it it could mean something."

Walt's dark face looked startled. "Me?" he said. "Marry Elly?"

Andy struck him on the shoulder. "You've had the inside track all the way. Now, catch hold of this rope and dig in."

Walt didn't argue. He sat down and got set, and Andy threw the free end of the rope over and began to slide down.

* * *

Andy thought it must have been a week later when his toes bumped the ledge. He was afraid to look up or down. On hands and knees he hugged the narrow outthrust of sandstone, looking at the relics before him.

Of Red Lubbock, nothing remained but

his skull and the large bones which the wind had not swept off; a few faded rags and his boots; and an old Navy pistol red with rust.

Andy picked up the gun. Suddenly he felt weak; he wanted to laugh, and he wanted to cry, for all the nights he had lain awake worrying, for his futile fears of a hangrope. The gun was rotten with rust. You couldn't even find the U. S. on it, let alone the serial number.

But just for luck Andy Coleman slung the revolver far out into the river. Then he went back up, climbing vigorously, like a man who fears nothing.

Walt looked more played out than Andy did when he won the top. They could hear the sheriff hallooing from the trail, but they just sat there side by side panting.

"Damn me," Andy said at last, "if that gun wasn't completely rusted out. I been worrying for nothing."

Walt snorted. "Sure you have. Something else you've been worrying about without anybody knowing it is Elly. Did I ever show you the picture of my wife and kids, Andy?"

Andy stared. "You—you ain't married!" he said.

Walt was holding out a wallet in which a brown daguerreotype was displayed. He chuckled. "If I ain't," he remarked, "it's going to be a big surprise to the family. I was goin' broke on a Nebraska homestead before I came out here. I saw that I couldn't support a family that way, so I sold out and moved the family in with my wife's folks and came out here to get started. I didn't want to bring them till I saw how it was going to work out for me. I still ain't sure."

Sheriff Billy Kemp topped the mesa and came towards them, blowing like a winded buffalo and mopping the sweat off his red face.

Andy took Walt's hand and wrung it hard. "You send for them tomorrow," he said. "With me to raise the cattle and you to sell 'em, there won't be the beat of us in New Mexich." Andy leaned back and sighed mightily.

Sheriff Kemp looked a little startled at the warmth of his welcome. But of course he couldn't know that Andy Coleman had just stopped worrying over a hang-noose and had started wondering how soon he could get Elly to give up the Dutch Flat school.

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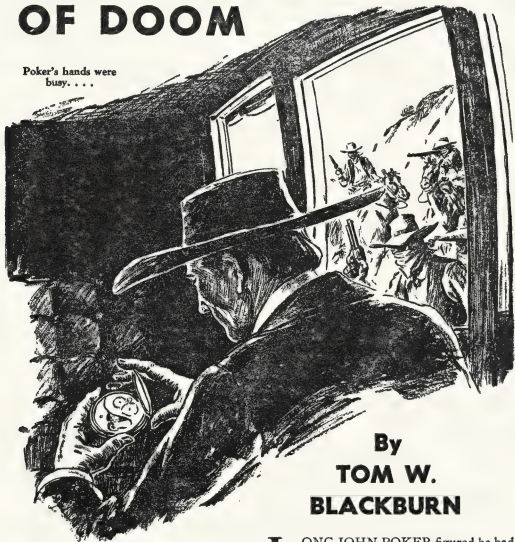
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JUAN POKER'S BELLS OF DOOM

Poker's hands were busy. . . .



By
**TOM W.
BLACKBURN**

★ ★ ★
*Facing disgrace, Juan Poker staked
his gun-hewn reputation on a broken
watch.*

★ ★ ★

LONG JOHN POKER figured he had about thirty seconds. The stage was rolling swiftly, but the driver on the box had already set his brake and was checking his teams. The masked men, who had appeared beside the road, were moving purposefully out into its center, rifles braced across their hips. They made ugly silhouettes in the twilight gloom.

Father Lucan, beside Poker in the coach, snorted explosively in his large and bulbous nose. John Poker knew what the sound meant—an unvoiced oath of regret for the satchel of mission funds in the boot behind

them. But he did not turn his head toward the *padre*.

Poker's hands were busy, slender fingers which had long ago learned their skill at cards, now swiftly lifting the back from an ornate watch, setting a small lever and replacing the back—all in thirty seconds.

With the watch again in his pocket, Poker straightened. The leaders of the stage team reared as a bandit snagged a check-line. The coach bobbed on its thoroughbraces and rocked to a halt. Father Lucan made a swipe at the skirts of his robe, hiking them above his knees to give him freedom of action. He snorted again, glared in brief accusation at Poker, and catapulted through the off-door of the coach. It was a brave gesture, an angry gesture; it nearly cost the good father his life.

This bandit crew was as competent as it had been reported to be. An extra man was waiting in the brush. As Father Lucan hit the roadway, this man emerged, a hand-gun at full cock. It was a bad angle for a shot and he was a little too close. This alone saved the robed cleric a bullet in his paunchy brisket. As it was, the road agent swung upward with his piece, rapping the sight-ridged barrel solidly under the point of Father Lucan's chin.

The *padre* grunted, lost his anger, and crumpled in the dust. The bandit leaned in the door of the stage and made a significant motion with his weapon. Long John Poker smiled wryly and climbed down.

The crew—there were five of them when Poker had a chance to count—worked swiftly and with the smoothness of a trained team. One stayed at the head of the horses. Two moved to the boot at the rear of the stage. Their grunts were audible as they forced a small pair of blacksmith's shears through the hasp of the lock there. The last two lined the driver and Poker up beside the fallen *padre*.

One of the bandits went through all available pockets with thoroughness. Poker regretted losing his guns and he winced a little when Father Lucan's beautifully worked rosary was ripped from his limp throat. But when the deft hands lifted the watch from his pocket, the ghost of a smile touched Poker's eyes.

It took less than a single handful of minutes for the whole thing. One man covered the others as they mounted, then

swung up himself. There was a rush of dust, a crackling in the brush, and they were gone.

The driver turned to Poker, his eyes not accusing as those of Father Lucan had been. "I told the *alcalde* that I'd better drive with a detachment of troops riding flank to my coach when I had valuable freight aboard," he said heavily. "Told him a single guard wasn't no good, not against that bunch! But some of these old Mexicans are stubborn. He said that you could handle any ten *bandidos* in California! Ha! You sure handled 'em—just like I would of! Maybe the old boy'll be convinced, now."

The stage driver had a quid in his cheek which he had not quite swallowed when the road agents appeared. He rolled this experimentally, now, and spat. He eyed Father Lucan's bulk. "Reckon we'd better h'ist up and roll—" he suggested. "The bacon's in the fire. I'd as soon dump this *padre* off at the mission afore he comes 'round and starts bellerin' for his lost cash-box. He's a mite rough on sinners, an' if we was sproutin' wings he could see, he'd swear after this that we was in cahoots with them bob-tailed *bandidos*!"

Poker bent. Father Lucan's bulk was a good lift for the pair of them. They eased him onto a cushion. Poker closed the door and climbed to the box. The driver rolled.

Minutes later they wheeled into the foreyard of Mission Buenaventura and Indian neophytes impassively unloaded the still limp figure of their Father Superior.

THE settlement growing up below the Mission Buenaventura was of little consequence, but with the overflow pouring southward from the crowded hills of the north, it threatened to become an important crossroads in *California del Sur*. It had, in fact, three gateways: one each, north and south, along the *Camino Real*, and another giving to the sea. Thus, trade was flowing through it, and with the trade, gold for payment. It was not surprising that the lawless should find fertile ground here.

Quitting the stage as it rolled past the livery, Poker ducked into the dark building and secured his extra set of guns from the pouches straddling the cantle of his saddle.

The doors of an inviting *cantina* beckoned to Poker. He turned into it, idly asked the bartender for the hour of the day, ordered

a drink, and measured the crowd. Poker had noted half a dozen taverns of varying repute and appearance in Ventura. The man he hoped to meet could frequent any one of them. However, the one in which he now found himself struck Poker's fancy.

It boasted a little better than average run of bar stock. It was a little cleaner. And Poker caught a glimpse of bright, full skirts, swishing across a door at the rear; an indication that this cantina purveyed a little entertainment—the swift, slipped feet, clicking castanets, and mocking ruby smiles of dancing girls. It was, in other words, the apparent gathering place of the monied and the elite.

It was fair guessing to suppose that the bandit chief who had relieved today's stage of Father Lucan's satchel of consecrated coin would choose the most festive surroundings to celebrate his haul.

Poker had two more drinks, watching the crowd grow. One table in particular was of interest. Two white-mustachioed *hacendados* sat at it, sipping a cooler of brandy from their own vineyards. Two or three younger blades of the old race were also at the table, laughing, passing talk with three broadcloth-coated Yankees. The entire party was genial. And the talk seemed to be chiefly of the town, of comings and goings—suitable gossip for neighbors. Poker thought he should like to meet the Yankees. Men of their stamp, cut to a pattern of friendly gentility, were a boon to the troubled hills of the Sierra where many Yankees were bitterly and justly hated.

Rising, Poker crossed to the bar, asking the man behind it again for the time. There were yet a few minutes—enough, he thought. He turned toward the mixed table. But before he could cross to it, the front doors banged open and a great voice roared out at him.

"Ah, Poker, you treacherous scoundrel, I find you!"

Father Lucan had halted just inside the batwings. A swath of brilliant red sashing was looped around his head, just in front of his ears, supporting the huge blue lump under the point of his chin. The good *padre's* obsidian eyes were aflame with righteous anger and he had one huge hand wrapped in the front of *Alcalde* Herrera's cloak. A timid constable was on the heels of the *Alcalde*.

"The soul of a saint!" Father Lucan snorted loudly. "Yes, for a fact, I have heard *peons* and troubled little people swear it! Juan Poker, a wicked man with the soul of a saint and the guns of the devil! I believed it. I did not know it was but true in part. When the *alcalde* swore but one man could end this unholy pillage along the high-road and sent for you, I, big fool that I am, breathed a sigh of relief. Not only did I entrust the funds of the bishopric to today's stage—I rode it myself. And behold the result, the while you sat on your haunches, thinking more of a bauble of a time-piece than defense of a man of God! You were commissioned to destroy this villainy. I demand you do it or answer to the *alcalde* a good reason why the presence of the feared Juan Poker did not trouble the *bandidos* this afternoon!"

Father Lucan stopped, sucked in a great breath of air which swelled his belly against its corded belt, and glared truculently at Long John Poker.

"There are times," Poker said with solemn slyness, "when hastiness is not a virtue."

The huge *padre* rubbed his bandaged chin and colored deeply.

"If I had been alone today," Poker went on, "we would know tonight what one of the men on the road looked like. I could not have killed more than one with the five facing me and no odds at my own back. The bishop would not only have lost a satchel of tithes but the biggest brother of the order in the Californias. And the stage company would have lost an able driver. Hastiness, you see, is not a virtue."

Father Lucan sent a blast of air through his big nose again and pulled sharply on the *alcalde's* cloak.

"A flexible tongue!" he derided. "Herrera, arrest this scoundrel before I lose my patience!"

The *alcalde* was a man for detail in office. "Arrest? On what law? There must be a law—"

"Make one, then!" Father Lucan exploded. "You're the government! Details, details, while the man we sent for to catch us some thieves drinks wine in a tavern and talks of patience and odds. And the culprits ride for the hills with their booty! Ah, if but for a night I was not a man of the cloth—"

POKER grinned. Blustering, often too hasty to be just, it still was not hard to understand why this portly man with the great voice was beloved from San Diego to the Marin shores.

Poker pointed to an empty table with a cluster of chairs and moved toward it. Reluctantly and still truculently, bringing the *alcalde* and the uncomfortable constable with him, Father Lucan followed. As the *padre* dropped into a chair, Poker spoke quietly.

"If I was among the *peons*, I would boast magic. With you, I will admit trickery. But within minutes I will produce at least one man who was behind a mask at the stage this afternoon—perhaps all of them—and in this room!"

Father Lucan's eyes widened.

Herrerra glanced nervously about the room, saw no villainy on the faces his eyes crossed, and grinned belatedly. "You make a joke!" he protested.

Poker shook his head. "Wait. . ."

With Poker's quiet boast that he would produce the thieves, a sudden tenseness had cut through the room. Poker glanced at the table which had earlier interested him. A couple of the younger *californios* had lost interest in the talk in their group. Their eyes were on Poker, watching—waiting. One of the old *hacendados* was asleep with his brandy glass in his hand, undisturbed by even Father Lucan's thundering. The three Yankees, aside from a brief and casual interest, had not broken the thread of their conversation.

Poker caught only one movement of interest. Two men who might be prospectors, teamsters, or ship hands, temporarily ashore, had knotted suddenly together at the foot of the bar. They did not look at Poker's table, avoiding it with obvious effort.

Glancing at the bar, he wished he could check again on the time. It must be very close—a pair of minutes—within seconds, maybe. He missed his watch.

Father Lucan breathed heavily and drummed on the table top with his stubby fingers, obviously making hard work of waiting for something which he did not believe.

Poker felt nerves tightening up within himself. He was conscious of the drums of his ears being tuned for a sound he was not sure he would hear.

Then it came!

It sounded distant, muffled, fragile. It was a tiny sound, like an incredibly small gong. It continued for thirty seconds with a regular beat, then was gone. It left no echoes. Every man in the room had heard it.

Father Lucan ceased his heavy breathing to stare curiously at Poker. Herrerra frowned and looked about him. Juan Poker, alone, seemed unaware something unusual was afoot. He made a swift survey of the other table and the bar—enough to see the pair at the bar were rigid with uneasiness.

Poker knew the sound. He knew exactly where it had come from. He knew the rest of the pattern. Leaning casually forward, speaking to Father Lucan, he shoved the play into motion.

"You've wailed about your losses and your clipped chin, but how about me? I was hurt, today, too!"

"You lost a watch, a mere timepiece!"

"But what a watch!" Poker corrected. "California has never seen another like it. A plain case, but the works—ah! That watch was made almost a hundred years ago in the Swiss city of Lucerne. It sounds the time as well as tells it. A tiny little alarm which can be set for any hour. The smith who made it called it the Bells of Lucerne. . ."

"Ahhh!" The sound was long, anticipatory, rumbling in the throat of Father Lucan. The cleric shoved a little back in his chair. A quick smile lighted up in his eyes and with a characteristic sweep, he again hiked his skirts clear of his knees.

Admiral "Bill" Halsey's gigantic battlewagons are getting set to unleash a terrific bombardment on the Jap mainland. Your War Bonds can ride those mighty sixteen-inch shells as they thunder America's answer to that sneak attack on Pearl Harbor—on the Blackest Day in History!

"So that's it!" the good father marveled. "That's what you were doing when you fiddled with the piece in the coach! You were setting it—and we have just heard the Bells. That watch is in a pocket in this room!"

Herrerra, not certain over his failing hearing, sat uneasily. The face of the local constable had set with the grimness of a man who knows his duty and fears it. Some of the crowd were stunned—all were curious. Men started to move.

The pair of rough-garbed men at the bar shoved away from it and started walking steadily for the door. They separated as they moved, plainly intending to take a flanking position to either side of the batwings and keep the exit open.

The three *Yanquis* at the mixed table rose easily, revealing now that all three of them had been for some time holding guns in their laps. The biggest of these spoke across the room to Father Lucan and to Juan Poker.

"The watch is in my pocket," he said calmly. "I didn't realize it was an heirloom—or a trap! I'd return it, but I'm afraid you won't need it." He paused, his stare pinning Poker down. "Put your guns on the table—" he suggested acidly.

Poker did just that. But he did not do it as the Yankee expected. His shoulders lifted a little as though he was shifting his weight in the chair. At the same time, his arms moved. The movement was not visible, but it ended with both of his guns at the level of the table-top, the butts still gripped in his hands, and the muzzles jetting flame.

It was an incredible piece of legerdemain. The Yankee who had been cool enough, with his comrades, to work his way into the confidence of Ventura's hospitable citizens as a way of knowing when to rob them and when to let them pass, who had been confident enough to admit his guilt and quietly attempt a walking get-away, was caught a fatal instant with surprise. He fired. But Poker was an instant ahead of him.

The Yankee's bullet scored the table in front of Poker, stinging the gaping Father Lucan with shredded oak. Poker's shot nailed the Yankee with the watch. But there were two more at the table and the rough-garbed pair who were flanking the door. Poker fired swiftly, trying to clear the

table. Gunsound drummed to an intolerable thunder. The two Yankees at the table buckled slowly, one of them falling forward over the limp form of the other.

With chambers nearly empty, Poker swung toward the door. But there was no need. The wide-eyed, swarthy constable of Buenaventura was peering with pleased surprise at the carcasses of the rough men who had been beside the door. They lay tangled at the base of the batwings. The constable's gun was wisping smoke.

Poker stood up. The tension which had come was gone. He took a step, and as he did so, the tiny, tinkling sound which had sounded earlier came again. Father Lucan bent far over the edge of the table, his eyes fastened on one of the spiked spurs strapped to Poker's heels.

Poker glanced downward, also. Bending, he unhooked a cheap miniature sleigh-bell of tarnished brass which was hooked over one spike. He grinned wryly and tossed the bauble onto the table.

"From the fringe on the lamp-shade in my room at the hotel," he said.

Father Lucan made protesting noises in his nose. "But the watch—"

Poker grinned. "Ten dollars in San Francisco at bonanza prices." He held the watch to his ear, then grinned more broadly. "As a matter of fact—it's broken."

"*Madre de Dios!*" Father Lucan breathed with sudden piousness. "Delivered from the devil by a lie, a broken watch and violence!"

The constable of Buenaventura spoke more nearly the truth: "By a man who counts odds—and evens them, *padre mia*," he corrected, "by Juan Poker!"

Poker hitched at his belt. "Have the quarters of the Yankees searched, Father," he suggested. "You will find your satchel. I'm turning in. I ride far tomorrow."

As he moved toward the door, old Herrerra found fervent tongue:

"Ay, ride far, my son—with our thanks and the blessing of God!"

"Amen!" Father Lucan echoed. But he muttered on, under his breath. "The Bells of Lucerne! Lucan, thou art as much a fool as the coated *Yanqui* thieves to have been so easily tricked!"

And a black scowl, not entirely empty of wonder and gratitude, darkened the wide face of the Superior of Buenaventura.

BATTLEFIELD FOR SALE!

By DON SLOAT



Sam Lorrigan purchased a ranch—and found that he had bought the battleground for a long-brewing range war.

SAM LORRIGAN stood in the dark of night, staring across the Barrens. The light from his cabin window, a few yards to his right, dimly outlined his tall figure. Behind the cabin, Skeleton Creek purpled and rippled over its rocky bed; arrogantly, as if aware it was the most valuable thing in the Barrens.

Across the Barrens, the lights in the schoolhouse blinked, which meant that folks were already gathering for the dance, but to the left of the schoolhouse, another lamp glowed steadily—as steadily as the light in the brown eyes of Irene Thorne, in whose cabin it gleamed.



Sam raised his gun. . . .

That pinpoint of brightness had come to mean much to him. It had become his star of hope, the sure reason why he must fight to the bitter end—to hold what was his.

A worried frown creased his forehead. He ran impatient fingers through his mop of red hair, as he headed for the barn to saddle up. Irene hadn't come into any peaceful situation, coming here. Trouble was at every hand. Not open trouble, yet, but a seething undercurrent that might drag everybody into it any day now.

He hoisted himself into the saddle and rode straight toward the schoolhouse. It didn't occur to him that he might be going into trouble himself, that most of the folks at the schoolhouse would be his enemies. He wasn't bent on trouble tonight, anyhow. All he wanted was a chance to dance with Irene. . . .

The music of guitars and accordion drifted out to him as he drew up at the hitch-rack; music and laughter and the cool shuffle of dancing feet. Sam whistled a bit to himself as his long legs strode toward the door, where he stood in the shadows a moment, watching.

Irene was in a set at the far end, dancing with Begg Creel. Sam's eyes narrowed as he saw that. But when the music stopped, Sam didn't hesitate. Tossing his hat to a bench near the door, he made his way through the crowd, paying no heed to the silence that fell over the crowd. Straight up to Irene Thorne he marched. When he stood before her, he bowed, and asked:

"May I have the pleasure of the next?"

Creel answered. "No, nester, you can't! I'm takin' the next, and the next after that!"

Irene's honey-colored head came up, and her brown eyes flashed fire. "I choose my own partners!" she said spiritedly. Then, putting her hand on Sam's proffered arm, "I'll be pleased to dance with you."

Nobody spoke for an instant, then old Sleepy Gilson, up on the platform, let an ungodly blast from his accordion. The guitar players whanged down on the strings—and the next dance was on. It was one of the newfangled two-steps, and Sam was glad. It gave him a chance to dance with Irene, all undisturbed.

He was even satisfied not to talk, just to dance and grin down at the girl. But she wasn't. After a moment she asked:

"Sam, just what's the matter? Whenever you come into a place, everybody goes still, acts as if trouble's brewing. I've asked, but nobody will tell me. I want to know."

He shrugged. "It isn't the sort of stuff a fellow wants to tell a girl when he's dancin' with her."

"I want to know!" she insisted.

Sam chuckled. "All right, Teacher, though you won't care about it. It was like this. When I drifted onto the Barrens, I got a job ridin' for Perce Duval, on the Spur."

She nodded. "That's the big outfit at the south end of the valley." Then, looking over at Creel, she asked: "He's foreman of it."

"Right. But he was just another rider for the outfit when I went there. And after awhile, when the job of foreman was open, Creel wanted it. I got it. He still kept wantin' it, only he didn't get it until I'd saved enough to buy my strip of land along the creek, and go out on my own. He saved up enough hate toward me, durin' that time, however, to last him quite a spell."

"I see," she said thoughtfully. "I knew Creel didn't like you. But there's the rest of the Spur men—and the Bar-J riders, too. Somebody told me once that the Spur and the Bar-J had had some bitter range wars in the past, yet they both seem to feel the same toward you."

"That's right," Sam agreed again. "Those two outfits have been hatin' each other for years—each of 'em wantin' to control all the grazin' land on the Barrens, and all the water. Then I stepped in. Well, that strip of land I got—" He swung her deftly around the edge of the crowded floor. "Both outfits had been wantin' it for years, but neither dared take it for fear of bringin' on another war. They've been like two cats eyein' each other outside a mouse-hole, and lettin' the mouse slip out and get the cheese." He chuckled again. "I was the mouse."

IRENE wasn't smiling as she looked up at him. "But Skeleton Creek runs across both their spreads," she said, as if it were very necessary to get it clear in her mind. "There's water enough for all."

"The old ford is on my place, right in the middle of my stretch. The creek's easy to

reach there, and both outfits had used it for years. When I fenced in my land, I offered to cut a right-of-way for both of them right down to the ford through my land, if they'd fence it off. I was too near broke to fence it myself. Only—they wouldn't deal."

"I'm glad you told me this, Sam." Her eyes were shining as she looked up at him. "Glad to know you tried to do your part. After all, they should have been glad to fence it for the accommodation."

Sam laughed as he swung her past the platforms. He was thinking of the answers he had gotten to his proposition. Dobe Jungo, owner of the Bar-J—the tall gaunt living skeleton of a man—had said that it took no more than three rods of wire and four posts to fence a grave. And that when he bought wire it would be for that. Duval, through Begg Creel, had retorted that he would see Sam in hell first.

Then Sam told Irene: "They don't want to drive their cattle through. They want it all left open, the ford and the creek, so their cattle can wander down to drink any time they feel like it. But let's forget all this. After all, we don't get to dance very often!"

She shook her head. "Sam, there's good land to the south, over the ridge of the Mesquites. You'd have no enemies there."

His mouth went tight. "I don't quit easy; not that easy."

"But Sam, a man's pride is no small thing—his life is greater!"

He looked down at her, spoke soberly, gently. "It isn't a matter of pride, Irene. It's like this: A man covers a lot of range and rides long trails, and finally when the urge hits him, he picks a spot and settles. Men whose roof has been the sky and whose bed has been their saddle, either get the notion or they don't. When they do pick a spot, whether it's the best on earth, or the worst, there's never another can hold them after that. I picked mine over there on Skeleton Creek."

"I see, Sam," she whispered. "I see."

The music ended, and they were beside the cloakroom door. Looking around swiftly, Irene plucked his sleeve, drew him through the door and into the darkness.

"Sam!" Her voice was husky. "Sam, I understand things now. I've got to warn you. There is trouble brewing. I heard

but I didn't understand, till now. Don't sleep in your cabin tonight, Sam. Please. And—I want you to go now. If I danced with you any more, it would make trouble—with Creel."

Sam's face was grim. "For you or for me?"

"For us both, Sam. Creel—I can handle him. I can learn things from him. Things—so your light won't go out across the Barrens."

He caught a hand, held it. "You mean that you watch my light, too?" he asked huskily. "The way I watch yours?"

"Yes, Sam." A little silence, then suddenly she stood on tiptoe, and he felt her lips, as light as a butterfly's wing, against his cheek. "Please go during this next dance, Sam. And good night!"

Then she was gone, leaving Sam standing there, feeling as if he were in the midst of a dream. Then, grinning, he went back into the other room, picked up his hat and left.

As he went along the graveled path leading from the schoolhouse to the hitching rack, he was conscious of the two men coming up at either side of him. One was a Spur rider called Trippy Keene. The other was the huge square-built sandy-haired foreman of the Spur.

"Listen!" Begg Creel said. "You're ridin' across Spur land when you come to the schoolhouse. See that you make it your last trip."

Sam didn't answer until he'd untied his horse. Then he said: "Tryin' to make it hard for me, eh?" His smile stayed until he'd stepped into the saddle, wheeled his mount and ridden away. Then his eyes narrowed and his face tightened as he rode across the Barrens, toward the cabin that was his home.

HE RODE around to the corral, but he didn't unsaddle. Instead, he tied the animal in the shadows of a cottonwood, then went back to the house. There, he lighted the lamp—wondering if Irene, as well as the others, would see it. After that, he pulled heavy flour-sacks across the window, so nobody could watch his movements. He made a pack of bread and bacon and coffee, sugar and condensed milk.

These he wrapped in blankets into a roll and he laid them carefully alongside the

back door. Then he blew out the light, hurried across and picked up the bedroll, closing the door cautiously. Keeping carefully out of any betraying patches of moonlight, he went to his horse, threw the roll over the saddle, and led the animal, under cover of the willows, to a raised spot from which he could watch the cabin. There he settled himself for his vigil.

He hadn't long to wait. They gave him credit for dropping quickly into healthy sleep, he told himself grimly, as he caught sight of the two moving dark shapes close to his cabin. In the next second, the bark of a gun splintered the night's quiet, there by the cabin wall. A window crashed with a splintering sound—the window right over his bed.

Then came Begg Creel's low drawl: "He always slept under that window. It was a bad habit."

And Trippy Keene's mumble: "I feel sick. Never saw a man shot while he slept before."

"Stop that! And bring that jug of coal oil here. Want to get this over with!"

A little silence, then a tiny match flare—a sudden spurting up of flame as it leaped against the cedar logs of the cabin wall.

Sam Lorrigan raised his gun. Then he lowered it again. He couldn't shoot a man from ambush, and it wasn't yet time, anyway. For his ear had caught something else, as the flames rose higher, eating at the dry cedar logs of his cabin. Riders were coming. From the north—the Bar-J men. From the South—Perce Duval's Spur outfit.

Seeing the burning cabin, feeling sure it meant Sam's death, both outfits were riding in to take possession of what they couldn't buy. Coming from opposite directions, to meet on the banks of Skeleton Creek.

Sam backed into the shade, well out of the white moon's searching rays, as hoofs and voices sounded nearer. Then he saw a white horse come out from the pack, to the north. Dobe Jungo's bony frame was silhouetted against the moonlit sky.

At the bank he stopped. "Duval!" he yelled, through cupped hands. "What happened to Lorrigan? His cabin afire, and nobody tryin' to save it. Where is he?"

From the knoll farther back came Duval's answer. "Begg Creel met us, goin' back across the Barrens. He said Sam had had

an accident, and he was goin' over to break the news to his friends!"

A little silence, then Dobe Jungo asked grimly, "We may as well know now as ever, Duval. Do we come to terms about this creek ford here? We'll settle it here and now—forever!"

Sam had the rifle from the scabbard on his saddle. Now he raised it—fired one shot that just missed Jungo's hat. That was as close as he had intended the bullet to go—and close enough! For, with an oath, Jungo jerked up the gun he'd held in his hand and emptied it—five shots—toward the group of Spur riders.

That was enough. From Duval's crowd came answering shots, and then the fight was on—gun-shot flames making a criss-cross pattern of death across the depths of Skeleton Creek.

But what damage was done, what lives were taken, Sam didn't have time nor wish to see. For he had other business on hand. Begg Creel was riding across the Barrens, to break the news to Sam's friends. And Sam had but one friend over there—Irene Thorne.

Sam led his horse upstream in the shadows of the willows. Around a bend, he mounted, sent the animal swiftly over the rocky bed of a small dry gully that cut away from the creek.

When he came out of the gully he could still hear the scattered gunfire. Sam didn't even look back. His eyes were on Irene's light, burning steadily in her cabin window.

Sam was within a hundred yards of the cabin when the light went out. He pulled his horse to a halt, jerked the rifle from its scabbard, leaped to the ground and went toward the cabin at a run. He heard the crash and tinkle of glass and knew it for the sound of a window pane broken by a gun barrel.

He came to a halt, lifted the gun again—but Begg Creel's rasping voice stopped him.

"Whoever you are, stop! I've got the girl in front of me!"

Almost before the last word of that furious command, Creel's gun spat, and Sam felt the burning rake of lead along his side.

He dared not risk a shot. Tossing the rifle aside, Sam sprang forward toward the cabin door, conscious of a wetness on his side, of a queer dizziness and sickening pain. Creel's gun crashed again from the

window, but missed. Sam forced his feet to greater speed, plunged up the low steps and flung the door back.

He staggered into the room. "Irene!" he called hoarsely.

Her voice was a joyous cry. "Sam! You're not dead!" Then: "Careful, Sam! Sa—" Her voice choked off as if a hand had been clamped across her mouth.

Sam kicked the door to, shutting out the revealing moonlight. Then he lunged toward the spot in the darkness where scuffling sounds guided him. He knew Irene was struggling for Creel's gun. He heard her moan of pain, made out her slight figure crumpling down, as Creel turned to face him, gun in hand.

Sam's hands reached out, caught that gun wrist in a firm grasp and suddenly jerked the arm upward, then threw his weight upon it, to the back and side. There was the feeling of tearing ligaments, giving way—and the howl of pain from Creel.

The gun dropped, and Creel's other fist came up. But Sam's reaching fingers had found bulk, stubbled jaw, then yielding flesh beneath.

Vaguely he heard the scratch of a match, the tink of a lamp chimney. Light flowed over the room. It showed the livid-faced man on the floor with Sam still bearing down upon him.

Irene said quietly, "Save him for the law, Sam."

Dazed, he looked up at her, dropped his arms and stood up dizzily. "You all right?" he asked huskily.

"All right, Sam. Creel told me you were dead. And when I told him what I really thought of him, he hit me. Then you came, Sam. And now—sit down and let me take care of that wound."

He staggered to a chair, and she bent over him, her deft fingers loosening the buttons of his shirt. He said thickly, "It's not too bad. I won. I can hold my land."

The girl's voice caught on a sob as she loosed the last button and began pulling his shirt back from the bullet's gash. "Oh, Sam! It's all over?"

"It will be. Dobe Jungo was ready to dicker with Perce Duval tonight. That shows they're tired of war. If Dobe and Perce are still alive, they'll dicker with me. They'll have had their fill of fighting, after tonight. Begg Creel was at the bottom of it, anyway. I've fought to hold my land. I'll fight that same way to have peace, and I'll have it. Creel will go to prison."

Irene laughed a little, in hysterical relief. "We can rebuild your cabin, Sam!"

Sam reached up to grip her arm. "Right, girl! Build a new one, a cabin big enough for two."

He didn't feel the pain as she gently cleaned his wound. He was picturing a cabin, large and new, where the lights would always glow in steady peace.



FURLOUGH UNDER FIRE

Underground Leader Jim Kane's morale was no longer all it should have been. Short rations, malaria, and not enough Jap corpses had begun to tell on him. But that self-appointed general, the fabulous Datu Ryan, had an antidote for guerrilla gloom—a nice long sea voyage through the Philippines, with Jap destroyer fire and a hail of machine-gun bullets replacing the more usual sedatives of bouillon in bed and quots on deck.

E. Hoffmann Price's "Guerrilla Furlough" is a postman's holiday you won't want to miss—and

it's only one of the many thrill-collectors' items in the big November—

Adventure
25c

On sale now

BULLETS WILD!



The tinhorn grabbed for his gun. . . .

Having lost his dad's cow money in a crooked card game, the kid figured he was in line for a tough payoff.

By GUNNISON STEELE

I ALWAYS figured Pap for a pretty smart man. He was honest and hard-working too. So the day I come back from Beartooth after getting likkered-up and into a poker game with a tinhorn named Ben Flowers and losing five hundred dollars of Pap's cow money, I figured on gettin' the hide took off'n me.

Pap listened quiet-like to what I had to say, chewing on a straw and squintin' off toward the mountains. Storin' up his wrath,

I figured, till he got me into the barn.

"I'm seventeen," I said, "and when Ben Flowers asked me to have a drink with him I figured I was salty enough to handle 'er. I was too, if I hadn't took a couple more to keep the first one company. Then, somehow, I was playin' stud poker with Ben Flowers and a couple other gents. Flowers got the whole five hundred, Pap. I'll work to pay it back. And now I'm ready to take my medicine."

"You done had your medicine, Thack," Pap said gently. "And I hope it does some good. Next time, you'll know better."

"You mean, you ain't mad?"

"No, I ain't mad—not at you. I'm mad at Ben Flowers. You was took, Thack. Ben Flowers is crooked and slick as a passel of eels fightin' in a lard bar'l. He knew I'd sent you into town with a bunch of steers to sell to Bill Kinlock. He knew you had the money. That's why he asked you to have that first drink."

"You figure he rooked me?"

"Sure, he did. Ben Flowers is like all other card-slicks. Long as they know the cards they're nervy and smooth as silk. Take away their cheatin' and they're gutless, a set-up for any amateur. Ben Flowers has got a slick system."

"I'll slick him!" I yelled. "I'll show him he can't cold-deck Thack Boone. I'll salt down the dad-burned skunk with gunsmoke and hot lead!"

Pap said quietly, "Hush that swearin', Thack. I'll handle this. You go on into the house and take some salts to get that pizen likker outta your stummick."

"What you aim to do?"

"First off, I aim to do some thinkin'," Pap said, and he hunkered down with his back against a corral post.

I went in the house and done what he'd told me. Maw knew something was wrong but she didn't ask any questions. So I told her. Like Pap, she didn't act mad. She said, "Your Pap used to be a poker wolf with tushes a foot long before I married him, and a drink of water would put him to bed for a week. But I tamed him. . . . I feel kind of sorry for Ben Flowers, though."

I could see Pap hunkered down out there with his hat pulled down over his eyes like he was asleep. But after awhile he got up, saddled his old roan and rode off toward Beartooth. That kind of scared me.

"You reckon he aims to have it out with Ben Flowers?" I asked. "Pap ain't no gunman."

"You stop worryin', Thackery," Maw said.

It was long past midnight when Pap got back home. He went to bed without saying anything to anybody. He didn't do any explainin' the next morning either. But after dinner he told me to change my britches and saddle my buckskin.

"We're ridin' into town," he said, and I had to be satisfied with that.

WE reached Beartooth about midafternoon. We fooled around awhile, Pap talkin' with his neighbors; Pap was a big, sandy-haired man with pale, mild eyes, and he had a lot of friends. Finally we bought some supplies in Square Sam Daw's store next-door to the Rainbow Bar Saloon. The Rainbow Bar was where Ben Flowers hung out.

Then Pap said, "Come along, Thack—let's get us a drink."

I felt funny, going into a saloon with Pap. He ordered two drinks of likker and downed his quick and easy, pretending not to notice how I had to fight mine.

I'd already seen Ben Flowers at a table close to the back of the room. He was a tall, flashily-dressed man with thin lips and cold yellow eyes. Now he got up and strolled over to us.

"Howdy, Boone," he said to Pap. "The drinks are on me."

"We don't need charity," Pap said, and pulled a big roll of bills from his pocket. "A five-hundred dollar loss don't bust us."

I could see the greed in Flowers' eyes as he looked at the roll. "Too bad about the button. He had some hard luck."

"Thack don't savvy poker much."

"Mebby you do?"

"Mebby I do," Pap said. "I used to make a fair hand. I learned a lot about tin-horns and their slick tricks."

Flowers' eyes went cold. "Meanin' what?"

"Why, nothin'," Pap said mildly. "I was just talkin'."

Ben Flowers grunted, "I don't like talkin'—I like action. Mebby you'd like to get back that money I took off your kid."

"Why, yes, I would," said Pap. "But I want a new deck."

Flowers gave a dollar to a puncher and told him to go over to Square Sam's place and get a new deck. Square Sam was the only one in town who handled cards. Folks might suspect that Ben Flowers was crooked, but they knew Square Sam was honest.

The puncher returned with the cards. Pap and Flowers went over to a table and sat down, and I sat down behind Pap. A small crowd had gathered. They must have

felt as I did—that that drink had gone to Pap's head. Nobody in Beartooth had ever seen him take a drink or play poker.

The game started slow. Flowers' slender, smooth fingers were mighty quick and deft with the cards. Pap's work-calloused fingers were slower, more deliberate. But right off I saw he wasn't a greenhorn. He sat slouched in his chair, but I could see he was watching Flowers close.

Ben Flowers was confident and arrogant. The pots were small, at first. They kept feeling each other out, and for the first twenty minutes nobody won or lost much. Then the game started to get steeper. And Pap started winning. I could see Flowers lose some of his confidence and arrogance.

The tinhorn was dealing. The cards were out, and Flowers' top card showing was a king. Pap's was an ace. Pap tapped the table. Flowers smirked, shoved in a couple of tens.

Pap looked pretty sad as he squinted again at his hole card. Then he shoved in four tens. "Misread my hole card," he drawled. "Or mebbby this'd be a good time to run a sandy."

Flowers sneered, "And mebbby you could stand another fifty!"

Pap nudged a fifty into the pot, and then two more. He looked about ready to cry. "I hate to see a man cut his own throat. But it's your funeral, tinhorn. Another hundred!"

Flowers hesitated, and I saw puzzlement in his yellow eyes. Then he called Pap's hundred, flipped his hole card. It was a red king. Pap flipped his own hole card, and it was a black ace.

"Two blazin' balls of fires," Pap drawled. "They hurt your eyes, tinhorn?"

Flowers cursed wickedly, that baffled look still in his eyes, and called for a fresh deck. But it went on like that, even after Flowers changed decks several more times. The tinhorn had lost his sneering, confident smirk and his blue silk shirt was wet with sweat. A dozen times Pap barely topped him; just as many times he bluffed him and turned his cards up in Flowers' face. I figured he had a thousand dollars of Flowers' money.

I COULDN'T savvy it. Pap hadn't changed. But now Flowers played like a greenhorn. Seemed like he always done

the wrong thing. I could see he'd lost his nerve.

The last pot was a scorcher. The first two cards, Flowers' up card was a queen, Pap's a jack. I knew Pap had jacks wired. The tinhorn started buckin' and Pap bucked back at him. Flowers' fifth card was a queen and Pap's a jack. That made him three.

Pap checked, and Flowers shoved in all he had. When Pap folded and tossed his hand into the discards I nearly tumbled out of my chair.

Flowers snarled angrily, "You dumb clod-hopper, throwin' in three jacks—"

Things got mighty quiet, and Pap drawled, "How you know I was holdin' three jacks, tinhorn?"

Flowers stuttered, "You—I was just guessin'—"

"You're a liar and a mangy crook to boot!" Pap said. "You know my hole card was a jack, because it had your mark on it. Every card in every deck we've used was marked. You cheated Thack, and you tried to cheat me."

The tinhorn yelled, "Can't no brushpopper make a sucker outa me!" He writhed his gaunt body upward and backward, grabbing for his fancy gun.

I'd never seen Pap drag a gun, but I saw it now, and it was like chain-lightning. His old Peacemaker bellowed.

The bullet drove Ben Flowers backward. He stumbled over a chair, his unfired gun clattering to the floor. He regained his balance and stood there swaying, naked terror and unbelief in his yellow eyes as he looked down at his shattered arm.

Pap said calmly, "Pack your warbag and ride, tinhorn. You're through in Beartooth. Don't ever come back. You got till sundown to get out of town."

Ben Flowers didn't argue. He circled me and Pap, stumbling a little in his haste, and went out the door. Pap looked at the spectators, who were just coming out from behind the bar and tables where they'd dived for shelter.

"Let that be a lesson," he said. "That slick-fingered tinhorn has been cold-deckin' you gents all along. He's taken advantage of the fact that Square Sam sold the only cards in town. Ever time Square Sam got in a new shipment of cards, that night Ben Flowers would prize open a loose window

and crawl into the store. He'd steam off the deck seals, mark the cards, then reseal the decks so slick nobody could tell the difference. He could read the backs of the cards almost as good as he could the faces. You gents didn't have a chance."

Well, the Beartooth-ers got pretty mad. There was some talk of stringin' Ben Flowers up, but Pap talked 'em out of it. Pretty soon Flowers rode out of town in a hurry. Then Pap and me headed out for home. I rode along for a mile or two, thinking, and then I asked, "Pap, how'd you figure out about Ben Flowers sneakin' into Square Sam's place and marking the cards?"

"Why, I just got to thinkin'," Pap said. "Besides, I knowed a case like this, a long time ago down in Texas, where there was just one place in a town where cards was sold. And, like Ben Flowers, there was a tinhorn who done all the winnin'. A puncher who'd lost a lot of wages took to watchin' this tinhorn, and found out he was sneak-in' into the store and markin' the cards. So,

remembering that, I figured Ben Flowers must be doin' the same."

"But if Ben Flowers was usin' marked cards, how'd you beat him?"

Pap looked kind of embarrassed.

"This puncher down in Texas, when he found out what was happenin', figured he'd fight the devil with his own fire. So one night he crawled through a window into the store and steamed open the decks. He messed up the tinhorn's marks, and added a few of his own, figurin' it would cross up the tinhorn and get him rattled. And it did. The tinhorn lost his nerve, just like Ben Flowers did, and this here puncher took him to a cleanin'."

I busted out laughin'. "So that's where you was most of last night! By ding, Pap, you're a slick one. That dad-burned card shark didn't know whether he was comin' or goin'!"

Pap frwnced and said, "Hush that swearin', Thack, or I'll dust your britches!"

He'd of done it, too.

FEUDIN' DAYS



The bitter feud which existed between the sheepmen and cattlemen had for its basis certain of the sheep's more obnoxious characteristics. The cowboy's disdain for the shepherd sprang only in small part from the fact that the herder's charges were comparatively diminitive—or from the fact that the shepherd's calling demanded little of the skill and courage that the cowboy brought to his job.

Cattle and horse hated the sheep with no less fervor than the cowpunchers who herded and rode them. And for the same reason:

Sheep gave off a strong and lingering smell which permeates the air and the ground they have traversed, also any waterhole they have visited. Once this smell reached the sharp nostrils of cattle and horse—a stampede away from the vicinity was likely to ensue.

But it wasn't the smell alone that bothered the animals. Sheep meant destroyed feeding grounds. For the sheep, in their constant traveling on the range, permanently destroyed the grass. In feeding, the sheep went right down to the roots—and to make the job complete they minced the roots to death with their small, sharp hoofs.

To the cattlemen and the cowboy sheep on the range was a plague of the first order—and a perpetual menace to the best interests, even the survival, of the cattle business.

KING OF THE



Major Iron Tail Blunt was right suspicious of young Dave Denton—when that buckskin scout came out of a redskin slaughter with his guns in his holsters . . . and his hair on his head!



CHAPTER

1

One Scalp!

Dave Denton, shot through the chest, was the only man left alive when the bloodiest fight that had ever taken place on Bad Water Creek came to an end that late-summer night on the north fork of the Oregon Trail. Long, long after the gunfire had ceased he opened his eyes and found himself half-propped up in the rocks there on

BUCKSKIN LEGION

Action-Packed Frontier Novel

Denton had never seen
such fury. . . .



By TOM ROAN

the east bank of the stream. The stars were out, cold and mercilessly white in the blue-black dome of the sky. A stout gust of wind came whipping up from southward, stirring through the scorched leaves and the bare limbs of the trees where the fire of the burning wagons had done its worst.

The most puzzling thing about it was the fact that Denton found his long yellow hair was still where it belonged. The Crows and Sioux of the early '70's were not often known to leave scalps behind when they wiped out a wagon train in Montana Territory.

And this had been a wipe-out, as bold and ruthless as anything Denton had seen. Twenty-two wagons had gone up in smoke. Stock had been butchered everywhere. The bodies of forty men, eleven women and seven children lay on the blackened ground.

The hair left on Denton's head was a puzzle that made him scowl from time to time. The hair was still up there, glinting now and then like a blood-smeared halo in the starshine and the distant glow of a still smouldering wagon.

Then he discovered that his six-shooters were still in their holsters. This was another puzzle to tax a man's wits. Any Indian's eyes would have blazed with envy at the sight of those six-shooters. They were the latest thing from Colt, beautifully engraved and beaded with gold and silver, ivory-buffed and sixteen inches long with their ten-inch barrels to give them added range and accuracy.

The mystery started clearing when he noticed a limp thing a yard long and lying like a fat whip across his lap. At the first glance it looked like a rattlesnake, then he saw that it was only the carefully tanned skin of a snake with the rattles and the buttons left on the blunt tail.

Every worthwhile Indian in the West carried something like this as his medicine—a charm to keep himself from harm and make him strong in the face of his enemies. Some Indian with tremendous power among his savage brothers had tossed the snakeskin across Denton's lap—and no red-skin in the whole infernal mess of them had dared to lift his scalp or touch his six-shooters!

A snow-white mare's half-soft, half-cautious nickering on the slope of the valley to eastward pricked up Denton's spirits a few

minutes later. He knew that nicker, and would have known it anywhere. It belonged to Silver Bullet, Phil Lane's fine young mare—Phil Lane whose twenty-two wagons had been gutted. Phil Lane, his friend, who had died in his arms.

The mare held some fair shade of promise as a way out of this, if one could catch her. Forty miles away on the Ruby River stood Fort Six, an army outpost. A man might make it on the mare. . . .

* * *

Bugle calls rolled and rocked up and down the Ruby. Two troops of cavalry—half of them raw-tailed recruits—were drilling in the bright morning sun on the high flat on the east side of the river. Sod-roofed log huts, a large trading store, a couple of saloons that were making money and family trouble, and about forty large army tents stretched under a fringe of cottonwoods gave the spot an excuse to be called a fort.

Major Timothy Blunt, a big, red-faced Irishman of sixty-odd, sat on the broad east porch of the store and lazily sipped at a horse's neck, his favorite drink, now that ice could be had by wagon from Horsethief. Better known among his fighting men as Old Iron Tail, he lifted a cagey eyebrow now and then as he glanced at the drilling troops.

He frowned as a twitter of women's voices came to him from the south end of the porch. Old Iron Tail Blunt never liked to see too many women around these far-flung army posts. There were quite a few of them these days in Fort Six. Two of them were coming up the steps at the other end of the porch—one was Blunt's wife, and the other was Jessie Lane, Phil Lane's red-headed sister. Damned pretty girl if Old Iron Tail knew anything about it.

Jessie Lane had been at Fort Six only two weeks. She had come in from Saint Louis on a Missouri River stern-wheeler, then overland from the mouth of the Yellowstone by the once-a-week buckboard stage that carried mail to the settlements. In a few days her brother Phil would be in with his wagon train, and she would go on to Horsethief with him where Phil was already about to fling wide the doors of a general store of his own. Talk had been whispered into Blunt's hairy old ears that Captain Baltimore Bell was trying to give

Jessie Lane the rush act into marriage.

Major Blunt arose, lifted his hat and bowed, then stiffened like a gun-barrel, faded old blue eyes suddenly focusing themselves on a silvery dot far down the valley. Phil Lane's sister and his wife said something. He did not catch it clearly and ignored it. Now the women and the girl saw him staring and turned to look. The dot in the distance had become a trifle larger. Blunt moved along the porch without taking his eyes from it.

Jessie Lane's voice jarred him when she spoke, her words sharp in his ears:

"It's a snow-white horse with a man on it!"

"It's a horse, yes." Old Iron Tail Blunt's voice was a growl. "My eyes are as good as yours, I reckon, but I don't see the man, Miss Lane."

"Don't boast, Tim." Nancy Blunt spoke up, a little dumpling of a woman who never hesitated to speak her thoughts after being dragged all over the country for forty years with a husband who had jumped to the beck and call of army orders so long he knew but little else. "Your eyes are not as good as they used to be. There is a man on that horse. I can see him without my glasses!"

"The man is lying almost flat." Jessie Lane's tone carried a new note of alarm. "There is no saddle on the horse. He rides as if he is clinging to the mane—like one seriously ill!"

"*Captain Bell!*" Blunt had turned, rocking back on his heels and sent his old cavalry voice rolling out over the drill grounds. "There's a horse coming up the valley. Send three or four of your men to meet it. There's a man on it. He rides like he's hurt!"

"And now," he turned, glowering at his wife and the Lane girl, "if there ain't a man on that horse you two'll have me right by the heels. The whole cockeyed army'll be saying I'm getting weak-eyed and a shade too old for frontier duty any more."

Down the valley, unswervingly, Silver Bullet was coming through.

hundred yards away. His Nancy Blunt recognized the mare, too. He noted that by the slow widening of her eyes and a slight flush of paleness creeping through her cheeks. For once in her ever-bossy, I'll-speak-my-mind-or-die life, Nancy had enough sense to keep her mouth shut while they waited there on the porch.

A tall, dark-skinned first sergeant and three buck privates had gone galloping down the valley. They had closed in quietly on the mare, the sergeant, knowing his horses, talking to her gently. With a man on either side of the mare, another bringing up the rear and the sergeant leading the way, they were not long in pulling up in front of the porch.

The yellow-haired, buckskin-clad man on the mare was unconscious now. His face so pale it looked as if all the blood had drained out of him to drip down the mare's snowy back and flanks. Major Blunt tried to be quick about it. Before he could get an order out of his mouth, the sergeant had whipped himself out of his saddle and to attention as he saluted.

"It's Mr. Philip Lane's mare, Sir!"

"Take that man on to the hospital tent!" snapped the major, trying to drown the sergeant's words. "My compliments to the doctors and tell them he is to have the best."

"But—but—" Jessie Lane seemed to be just waking up from her shock—"he said the mare belonged to Philip!"

"Yes, damn it," shot back the major as the sergeant and his men moved on, "that sergeant's mouth is bigger than his brain! You'd better go to the house with Mrs. Blunt, Miss Lane. I'll have a report for you as soon as we can possibly get this young man in condition to talk. He is Philip Lane's best friend."

"The blood—all the blood!" The girl looked as if she was going to faint as the major wheeled away, spurs dragging harshly. "It was all over him, all over the mare!"

"Yes, dear." Nancy Blunt slipped her arm around her. "Out here it seems to be the all-mighty curse for us to see a lot of it. Come! We'll go back to the house. We'll just have to wait now."

They should have been left to themselves, woman to woman to handle this, but Captain Bell had dismissed his troops and was

there as they reached the front porch of the major's house. He dashed up like a shot and flung down with a curt order for his horse to be taken to the corral by the orderly who had followed him.

Baltimore Bell—called the Belle of Baltimore, behind his back—looked like something that had been melted down and poured into his uniform. Something about his hard, stiff pace always made many men think of a strutting gander on parade. His dark mustaches were always carefully brushed and curled. There was a hint of powder in his sideburns as if to add dignity to the stern, long face.

"I have just heard the news." Hat in hand he bowed stiffly. "If there is anything I can do—"

"There is nothing, Sir!" Nancy Blunt was brusque enough about it. "I believe Miss Lane should be quiet just now."

"Indeed, indeed!" Bell had already stepped upon the low porch and was pulling up a couple of chairs at a table behind the sheltering coolness of Mrs. Blunt's trellis of morning glories. "Perhaps a nip of brandy would be the logical thing."

"A cup of tea will do." There were times when Nancy Blunt had to hold on to herself when handling these young army upstarts in their pretty uniforms, their fancy mustaches and sideburns. She was holding herself back now, but it was evident from the start that there would be no way of being rid of Baltimore Bell unless the major took a hand in it.

Blunt was not long, striding down from the hospital tent like an old war-horse, and yet before he could get there several more women had come rushing over, eager for the news that had spread rapidly over the fort. He was scowling at Bell as he snapped orders:

"You will take Troop D and head for Bad Water Creek. Troop B will follow you as far as the divide as a rear guard." He pointed to a tall, bald ridge twenty miles to southward. "Of course, each troop will take its heliograph to keep in constant communication with the post."

"Then, Sir," always the model of exactness in the presence of his superiors, Bell was up, stiffer than a ramrod, "there has been trouble? I—er—mean," he stumbled, "serious trouble?"

"If you've got to have it all," Blunt's

eyes flashed, lips curling, "right here in front of the womenfolk, there has been a wipe-out on Bad Water. You should know what to do when you get there. And if you don't," even Blunt stiffened now, "your first sergeant will."

"Yes, Sir!" Bell could not help another side glance at the girl. "I will heliograph back my report immediately."

"That," Blunt almost lost his military manner enough to nod, "is the general way we do things out here."

BUGLE calls fell faintly in Dave Denton's ears in the big hospital tent. He heard distant commands, the sounds of horses moving, and smelled dust. Two doctors had probed and gouged at his wounds. An orderly had spilled a tiny packet of something bitter on his tongue and held a glass of water to his fevered lips. He was pretty sick, he guessed. At times he heard himself talking to Silver Bullet. At some other time he was again helping Phil Lane bury his bags of minted gold in the rocks on the bank of the creek.

There was but little memory of Silver Bullet bringing him into Fort Six. The memory of the soldiers meeting him down the valley was vague, like a snatch of some almost forgotten dream. He had talked to the sergeant, had told him of the fight, at least something about it. Major Tim Blunt's face was the most familiar. Perhaps it was because he had known and admired the hard, saddle-pounding old warrior for a couple of years now. Men liked Blunt when they really knew him.

The girl came the fourth day. A handsome man with a touch of white in his sideburns was keeping close to her, acting as if afraid something would snatch her away. He did not know that the girl had almost quarreled with Blunt for the privilege of this short visit. It was nice. It was always nice to have a woman around when a man was sick.

"You are prettier," he muttered, "than your picture we buried with the gold, ma'am."

It was all he had said, but he had recognized her. He had known that she was here waiting for Phil, and Phil had always had her picture close by. It was a large daguerreotype, daintily hand-tinted and bound in a stout cowhide case, and she was

more and far more beautiful than any picture could have told. Had it not been for the hot flashes of fever coming over him he would never have dared to unleash his thoughts—certainly not with the first words he might speak to her. After she had come and gone he kept seeing her, but it was always the same, the man with the white in his sideburns hovering close.

Toward sunset on Sunday, the seventh day, she came again. He knew then that she had been there only once before. His head had lost its fevered buzzing. The hot flush had left his cheeks. Blunt had been there in the morning and in the afternoon.

An orderly had shaved him, propping him up on his pillows, and had slipped a fresh shirt on him just before the girl came in. Nancy Blunt and three other women were with her now. It was a relief not to see the prettied-up captain hanging over the bunk like a hawk about to spread its wings.

She told him about Phil, repeating what Blunt had told him a couple of days before. She was brave enough about it, dropping tears only twice as the grip in which she held herself slipped. His mouth was still dry, making it difficult to talk, but he managed it. Toward the end of it she startled him when she told him that Captain Baltimore Bell wanted to buy Silver Bullet.

"Yes, ma'am." It was harder than ever to speak, but he got it out with the fever appearing to come back into his eyes. "She is one of the nicest things I have ever known in the way of horses. I sort of had hopes that I might be able to buy her, if she would be for sale."

"I may not sell her," she smiled, trying to be nice, he knew. "I still don't know what I'm going to do, now that Phil is gone. I—might go back to Virginia."

"Yes, ma'am." He was watching her eyes. "But if I could gentle her a little more, she would be a beautiful thing for you."

"I've thought of that." She nodded. "If, of course, I don't go back to Virginia, Mr. Denton."

"There's just one thing." He was about to warn her now, and he did not want it to sound like a warning. "Silver Bullet's a little headstrong. You see, I know, ma'am, because I broke her for Phil. Sometimes—well, sometimes she would go into one of her spells and throw Phil all over creation and I'd have to work on her all over again."

"Then you would have to gentle her even more for me?"

"Yes, ma'am, a lot." He looked up at the wind stirring the roof of the tent, and decided to let her have the whole of it. "I'd like to see you on her, but I'd really be afraid for a long time. You see, Miss Lane, horses have queer ways. Some mares will take to women, and some won't take at all."

"You mean," she laughed in spite of thoughts of Phil, "that horses know the difference? They know men from women?"

"Yes, ma'am." He smiled at her. "They know a world of things. In a way, I guess, you've got to be what some call horse-smart before you can know just how much a horse does know."

"You like horses, don't you, Mr. Denton."

"No, ma'am, I don't like horses." He looked up at the wind stirring the canvas again, an odd smile twitching the corners of his mouth. "I love horses, Miss Lane, the mean ones and the good ones, every bone in their bodies. It may be foolish, a little crazy even, but sometimes I feel that they are a part of me."

She was smiling when she left him. In some small way he felt that he had contributed something to ease her pain for Phil. When he went back to sleep he dreamed of Silver Bullet running in bright moonlight, her snowy mane and tail flying banners in the wind.

Everybody likes a PIN-UP GIRL. But a Western PIN-UP GIRL is something very special! You can find her in the current issue of our companion magazine *Rangeland Romances*. There is also a limerick prize for you word wranglers. Ask your newsdealer for a copy of *Rangeland Romances* TODAY!

CHAPTER

3

"Balty!"

Major Blunt mentioned the rattlesnake skin for the first time Monday afternoon. It had been hanging by its thong, he explained, looped around the butt of one of Denton's six-shooters. The old man listened quietly as he was told all there was to tell about it. In the end he nodded, and then came out with a direct question.

"What did you ever do for Chief Buffalo Bull that would make him save your scalp when all the others were losing their hair?"

"I wouldn't know." Denton's brows knitted in a puzzled frown. "I have never seen Buffalo Bull in my life—and very few whites have and lived to talk about it."

"That's true." Blunt stared at the floor thoughtfully. "Yet, young fellow, that snakeskin is certainly Buffalo Bull's medicine pouch, sling or whatever you'd call it. I took a look into it. Can't see that it's much different to the medicine most Indians carry. The skin holds six dried lizards of the common variety, four little dried rattlesnakes, a couple of eagle claws, an owl's bill, a couple of pieces of quartz, a bullet, a cartridge shell, a poisoned arrow head, something that looks like grains of powder and a lot of herbs. The usual fixings."

"But," he squared himself around in his chair, "no Indian'll let loose his medicine without a mighty powerful cause behind it. Mind you, now, I ain't thinking it was anything against you, in spite of one or two of my officers. I might think something, of course, if I didn't know you. You're on the square, David. Believe me when I say I know that. But somewhere, and the Lord alone knows where, you've done something that made Buffalo Bull stop and think when he saw you lying there in those rocks. Captain Bell and his men buried everybody down there in one long grave. There wasn't a man, woman or child in the lot that hadn't lost its scalp."

Old Iron Tail arose, yawned and stretched. "Buffalo Bull's not the kind of an old cuss to pay twice. Better look sharp if you two ever meet again. He'll take back his rattlesnake skin—and your hair with it."

At four the next afternoon Jessie Lane visited Denton. Captain Bell loomed behind her with a large cake the girl had baked.

"I thought you would like it." She smiled when Bell placed the cake on a small table.

"Almost too good for a bullwhacker, Denton." Bell laughed, but a laugh could not hide some things. "I'm told that there are an even dozen eggs in it. Real eggs brought down yesterday from Horsethief."

"That's a lot of trouble for a trail scout, ma'am." Denton felt that he had to say that after he had thanked her for the cake. "It'll be a lot more than I can eat but there are others sick in here. I'm sure they'll appreciate a slice of it—if you don't mind."

"Not in the least, Mr. Denton!" The girl laughed. "That was really what I thought when I was baking it."

"By the way, we've a question or two to ask, Denton." Bell seemed confounded eager with what he was going to say now as he slipped a chair under the girl on the left side of the bunk and seated himself to the right. "The first time we came to see you you said something about burying gold. I trust that you were not delirious, old fellow?"

"I mentioned something about it." Denton could feel the color mounting in his cheeks. "We were hauling forty-four thousand dollars in Phil's strongbox."

"Forty-four thousand!" Even Bell's oiled and prettied hair looked as if it was about to rise and stand on end. "Denton, that's money in any man's language!"

"Four thousand of it belonged to me."

"To you!" Bell's eyes widened. "That's a lot of money for a bullwhacker, Denton."

"YOUR pardon, Captain Bell," a hard sheen had filled Denton's eyes, "and your pardon also, Miss Lane, but there's one thing that must come straight. I never whacked a damned bull in my life."

"No offense, old man, no offense!" Bell leaned forward and patted Denton's shoulder soothingly. "Bullwhacker was just something I hit upon. Really now," he sat back, spreading his hands innocently, "I didn't want to address you as a professional fighting man in the presence of Miss Lane. She might get the impression of an ordinary rowdy."

"I haven't held that reputation in many places." There was cold, hard steel in Denton's tone. "But no matter," he tried to shrug. "We were talking about gold. Except for my four thousand, the rest belonged to Phil. I made him a promise when he was dying on my lap. I told him I'd see that Miss Lane got every dollar of it—"

"Then," Bell's eyes were suddenly narrow, "you knew Chief Buffalo Bull's medicine snake was going to save you?"

"There was no pouch then, Captain Bell." Words were getting harder and flatter for Dave Denton now. "I promised Phil that I'd carry through, if I lived. He knew it without my promising, I guess."

"Take it gently, my friend." Bell quickly leaned forward and patted his shoulder again. "I seem to annoy you for some reason I can't understand, Mr. Denton."

"You do." Denton let him have it bluntly. "I'm not very happy about that medicine snake. I can't figure it out. If I've ever seen Buffalo Bull in my life, I didn't know it. I do have quite a few friends among the redskins—"

"That's quite an admission, Denton!" Bell had stiffened. "If you knew as much about the Indians as we know—"

"I know plenty, Bell." It was Denton's turn to cut in and he was not slow about it. "I was born in Texas, twenty eight years ago. I spoke better Comanche at seven than I did my own tongue. When it comes to my knowledge of Indians and horses I'll lay my money on it. How long, Sir, have you been on the frontier?"

"Get back to the gold, old fellow." Bell was trying to laugh again. "I believe that was the real subject."

"I tried to stay on it." Denton was frowning. "When I'm well enough to ride I'm going to ask the major for a wagon and a few men as an escort to go back and get the gold."

"That's just where I'm going to save you the trouble." Bell was leaning forward again. "At dawn in the morning I'm heading south to meet a settler train coming in from Laramie. We don't want another wipe-out on our hands. I'll pick up the gold on Bad Water for Miss Lane. You can tell me, of course, how to find the strongbox?"

"It's not in the strongbox." Denton was

looking helplessly at the girl. "It's buried in four places, in buckskin bags. I'd like to go for it myself. I would know just where to put my hands on it."

"If it's all still there?"

"It's there." Denton smiled thinly. "We were careful enough to not let any Indians see us burying it, and I'm the only man who got away."

"Thanks to the medicine snake!" Bell laughed, looking upward to avoid the steely glint of the eyes in the white face on the pillow. "I'll swear I can't understand that part of it with everything else appearing to hang together so well. By the way, I suppose you have a receipt for your four thousand dollars?"

"A receipt?" Astonishment was suddenly in Dave Denton's face. "Why, no, I haven't. Phil Lane would have laughed in my face or shot me, if I'd asked for such a thing."

"Philip was very close to Mr. Denton." Jessie said, taking his part at last. "In every letter he wrote in the past two years he mentioned David Denton. It's somewhat hard for me to call him Mr. Denton. I seem to have known him for years and years."

"My friends call me Dave, ma'am." He looked up, eyes smiling. "I'd like it if you would."

"Thank you, David." She thrust down her hand. "From now on let me be Jessie to you."

"My friends," Bell cleared his throat, "call me Balty."

CHAPTER

4

Soldier's Return

He had to tell them in the end. Baltimore Bell would never have managed it alone. The girl wanted it. Reluctantly Denton gave up the information at last and drew a sketch of the creekbank, certain trees and the four places where the gold was hidden. The sketch was crude, and yet it was clear enough for any man to go right to the places.

"The cottonwood recently split by lightning is your starting point," he explained with his pencil. "The buffalo skull with the right horn missing lies wedged between the two rocks here with a last year's bird nest inside it. Stand behind this big rock

in front of the tree with the skull directly behind you. You'll be standing over the first of the bags. Turn, face the skull. It's twelve paces between the rock and the skull. Four paces will take you to the next plant, four to the other, and the fourth is under the rocks just below the nose of the skull. In all there will be eight bags."

"And how much gold," Bell wanted to know as the last thing, "will I find in each place?"

"I can't tell you that," Denton frowned. "Don't believe Phil could, but I would say that it's just about evenly divided."

"Then," Bell was studying him closely, "you never counted it?"

"Captain Bell," Jessie Lane's voice was sharp, "you don't count money in the fix they were in! David says there were at least four hundred Indians around them!"

"Yes, ma'am," Denton nodded, "and they had better guns than the most of us. White men somewhere furnished those guns—to kill whites! I've told Major Blunt I believed there were white men among them, and I still believe it, though I never caught sight of a white face all during the fighting."

He was half-glad when they were gone. . . . As tough in muscle and bone as a wagon tire, he was out of the bunk on Friday morning. Saturday morning found him just about done with it. Toward noon he hobbled over to the corrals and log stables on the north rim of the post. He used a stout cottonwood stick an orderly had cut for him. He wanted to see Silver Bullet—and there was a slight hope that Jessie Lane might see him and come over to the corrals.

Silver Bullet was glad to see him. She came over to the fence to meet him and put her head over the top rail to muzzle him. One of the cavalymen—a big, raw-boned private named Briss—had groomed and daily exercised the mare. Knowing that a piece of gold would change hands, Briss appeared in the middle of the petting. He spoke of Captain Bell, after a ten-dollar coin had been slipped into his hand:

"He says he's goin' to buy 'er, Bell does. Talk's goin' about that he's offered the girl two hundred dollars for her."

"Two hundred!" Denton looked at him quickly. "Almost any plug of a horse out here is worth more than that, Briss."

"Hell, you think I don't know it?" Briss tried to smile. "He's down on the price, I've heard, because it's a mare. Some don't like a mare for saddle stock, but everybody knows a mare out here is worth more than a horse from the breedin' standpoint."

"And you're telling me so I'll tell Miss Lane?"

"I am, in a way, yes," Briss kicked at a pebble. "Only I don't want it said where the information came from. You know what Bell could do to me. He rides roughshod over everybody. I ain't heard any man in his own troop say he likes 'im. They wonder how he'll turn out once under fire. That's going to be the test."

"But they all know the major?"

"Damn, yes!" A sparkle lit the soldier's eye. "Gimme Old Iron Tail when the reds are tearin' the mountains down. He'll take you through with his reins in his teeth, the old saber swinging and his six-shooter poppin'. There ain't a man in the outfit who doesn't cuss 'im about somethin' at least five times a day, but there ain't a one of 'em who wouldn't roar through hell with the old boy. We love him, damn 'im! He's a man, Mr. Denton, an' the Belle of Baltimore's just a stuck up fool."

"His friends," Denton grinned as he turned away from the fence, "call him Balty, Briss."

"Wait until the fellas hear that!" The soldier looked like he was going to explode with laughter. "I've only got sixteen more days to do before I get my discharge. Before I re-up I'd like to call him that straight to his face. . . . Here comes Old Iron Tail."

IT WAS like talking about the devil and seeing him appear. Iron Tail was walking slowly but stiffly, looking as mean as an old rooster hunting a fight. When he saw Denton coming toward him he halted and waited for him.

"Guess you think I forgot you," the major growled, "but I didn't. Glad to see you out and about. You'll be on a horse in a few days and think nothing of it. Quicker'n I will, I'll bet. I've got me another carbuncle about as big as my fist. It makes sitting down something damned fierce unless I go around with a flock of feather pillows tied on behind. Jessie Lane's been under the weather, too. She sprained

her ankle the night after she was over to see you. Come over to the house and eat a bite with us on the porch. It's sumptuously cool there. Jessie wants to talk to you, anyhow, about that store Phil was going to open."

This was more like it. An eager light kindled in Denton's eyes as he fell in beside the major.

The girl was on the porch, using one of the major's canes for a support when they came up. Her left foot and ankle was in a bandage. She greeted him warmly, but any chance to talk to her alone seemed out of the question. He had no more than seated himself on the porch before a cloud of dust down the valley told them that a large party of horsemen were galloping up the river.

Denton's spirits fell when he saw that it was Captain Bell and his troop. Behind them, five miles away, trailed a long wagon train with their canvas tops swaying in the bright sunlight and ballooning from a hot wind that had sprung up from southward.

As always, Bell looked like something that had just jumped out of a band-box when he galloped up. Denton suspected—and afterwards knew it was true—that he had stopped somewhere down the river to clean up and don another one of his flawless uniforms.

Bell swung out of his saddle and touched his hat to the major, then bowed to the girl. His eyes were like two bullets when he looked at Denton.

"I'm afraid, Denton," Bell's lips curled, "that a very grave mistake has been made somewhere."

"Where, Bell?" Denton was on his feet, the captain's face enough to make him rise with a feeling of ire. "Don't say you didn't find the gold on Bad Water?"

"Oh, certainly." Bell smirked. "I found each spot, two bags in each place, just as you pictured them. The bags are on one of the supply wagons behind us, and under a carefully selected guard, including Lieutenant Shafter and Jackson, the first sergeant. Naturally, I counted the money. I can't understand why you would tell Miss Lane there was forty four thousand dollars—when there was only twenty four."

"My-Lord, no!" Denton had hobbled off the porch, halting a yard in front of Bell. "Phil said he had forty thousand. That

was just before I gave him my four thousand, the first night out of Laramie, and Phil Lane never told a lie in his life."

"Perhaps," Bell's lips curled again, "Mr. Lane didn't trust you quite as much as you thought?"

"You're a damned liar, Bell!"

The words came out of Denton's mouth like a blast from a shotgun, but they were no faster than Captain Baltimore Bell. The captain swung forward, lightning with his hands and on his feet. A powerful fist smashed upward. Unable to get out of the way on his stiffened leg, Dave Denton caught the blow squarely on the point of the chin, and dropped like a dead man on the ground.

The girl screamed.

Old Iron Tail roared an oath from the porch.

"YES, I've ordered him confined to his quarters!" Old Iron Tail Blunt's voice was low-growling thunder when Denton heard it again. "I'm court martialing him under the Sixty-Second Article of War. By the gods, you can try a man for just being alive under that."

Denton opened his eyes. It was a surprise to find himself back in the hospital bunk with Captain Tucker, a bald-headed doctor, bending over him. Captain Tucker was the next to speak:

"He's as weak as a kitten. There was very little blood left in him when he came in. He should have remained in bed another week. That hole in his chest was an ugly one. Many men would have died with it there on Bad Water Creek instead of getting on a mare and riding forty miles bareback to bring in the report. I had no idea he would go out and get into a fight."

"Mr. Denton didn't get into a fight," growled the major. "He just went out and got hit by a dressed-up bully who claims he was a boxing champion back in his school days."

It was the beginning of Dave Denton's first quarrel with Old Iron Tail Blunt when the doctor left them.

"If you don't release Captain Bell," Denton argued, "I'll swear I'll testify in his favor. No man's going to be tried by a general court martial for me, Major Blunt."

"You're a fool—and a damned fool!"

Blunt turned away at last, hands behind him, his carbuncle contributing no soothing factor to his ire. "I might have known it. Fact is, I did know it. And I know you." He turned, glowering. "Before you're done, David, you're going to make it worse. You'll shoot it out with him, and there and then Bell will bite dust. I know you! But it won't be very pretty when you kill an army officer out here, young fellow. I warn you, dang you, David, I warn you!"

Old Iron Tail started to stalk away, wheeled and came back. "You started trouble with Briss, too!" A mean glint flashed in his eyes. "You gave him ten dollars for taking care of the mare. He ran the ten up to around seventy dollars in a crap game, and last night he sneaked out his horse and headed for Horsethief and the honka tonks. Best farrier in the army. A natural without book-brains behind it. He's been made sergeant three times in this hitch. Whiskey and women always bust him up. We'll have to put him in the guard-house when we get him back, and here it is only about two weeks until it'll be time for his discharge. I've been hoping he'd re-enlist."

With that, Old Iron Tail left Denton. . . .

Several days later Denton was on his feet again. He headed straight for the corral to see Silver Bullet. Briss was still away on his spree. A big soldier named Foote had been taking care of the mare and doing an excellent job of it. Foote said:

"We hear you're gonna get Silver Bullet from the young lady, an' the men are glad. . . . Lord, would you look who's comin'! Drunker than seven hundred dollars!"

It was Briss, bearded, unwashed, half-asleep in his saddle. He was so drunk it looked as if his horse was drunk on the smell of him. With his last nickel gone, his gun missing, and nothing left to pawn for a drink, the glad-hand crowd in Horsethief had had enough of him. Somebody in the new town had helped him pile into his saddle and had headed his horse down the river.

Baltimore Bell appeared as Briss almost fell out of his saddle at the corral gate. Briss belonged to Troop B. Bell should have left him to Captain Billy Kennedy.

Rare was the troop commander who did not know how to handle his own men with a few quiet words. Bell roared for the corporal of the guard, but he would not be satisfied with that. He started in on Briss like a man killing snakes.

"Get your heels together!" he barked, striding right up in front of him. "Make those spurs click! You're a disgrace to the entire army, you inebriate!"

"You're a liar!" bellowed Briss, stiffening back against his horse, eyes suddenly wide and wild. "My folks mighta been damn pore, but they was as decent as yores!"

And then, before any one could blink an eye, Briss had struck with one crazy lunge. Caught as Denton had been caught Saturday at noon, Baltimore Bell received a big red fist flat on the point of the chin. It was one of those long-swinging blows. Any man should have been able to dodge it, but Bell was gripped by surprise. Never could he have imagined a buck private suddenly lashing out to knock down a captain. Before the shoving smash of the blow had left him he had been driven backward and half-through the corral gate.

Bell was there for only a moment, and then he was coming back, an absolutely madman on the charge. Briss, realizing what he had done, had stiffened back. Some of his drunkenness had vanished.

"I'll show you!" Bell's voice could have been heard all over the post. "You would strike your betters!" He drew his gun. The long barrel came down on the top of the soldier's head.

Briss fell against the horse. The horse snorted and lunged away. Briss fell, legs soft sticks of dough under him. Captain Bell again brought down the gun-barrel, across the back of the neck.

Baltimore Bell was killing a man right there in front of the gate when Dave Denton crawled through the fence. A corporal and two guards were coming. They were still quite a distance away between the guard house and the corrals when Denton caught Bell by the shoulder and wheeled him back, hard against the gate.

"Just a minute, Bell!" Denton's tone was as hard as ice. "I think I'll have a little hand in this."

"You!" Bell swung up the gun to fire. "I'll kill you!"

"Not today, you pretty-faced whelp!"

And then Dave Denton hit him. Denton was still weak, not at all his best, but fury made up for the weakness. Unlike Briss, Denton did not go for the chin. He smashed straight in, a powerful fist covering nose and mouth.

Bell went back, rocking, reeling and smashed against the gate. The gun dropped from nerveless fingers. Bell still on his feet, but it was old Billy Hell, himself, after him now. The blows poured in, smashing, the red splattering and flying. Bell was out on his feet by the time he had stopped the third blow. He started to fall as the fourth blow smashed against the side of his long nose, appeared to tear it loose and move it around toward the right ear.

The corporal got there just as Denton stepped back, and let Bell fall face-first in the dust.

"Put them all in the guard house!" That was Old Iron Tail Blunt's voice. "Lock 'em up and throw the keys away."

CHAPTER

5

Horsethief

No one went to the guard house when Old Iron Tail Blunt had a couple of minutes to get a grip on himself. Private Briss was out cold. Captain Bell was just as cold. With a guard ordered posted over the trooper, Briss was carried to the hospital along with the captain. It was irony in the meanest manner when Captain Tucker ordered Bell placed in the bunk Dave Denton had deserted. Every soldier at the post was holding a tense face to keep from bursting out laughing.

"And you, Dave," Blunt growled at him, "you're getting out of Fort Six—now! I'm letting you have the use of a buckboard. Jessie Lane's going to Horsethief with you, and you can find a decent place for her to stay a few days. . . . I'll be damned if I'll have you hanging around here another hour!"

Denton got his belts and six-shooters when the rig was ready. He took old Buffalo Bull's snakeskin with him. Jessie Lane's gold, what was left of it, was placed in the buckboard. Denton owed a lot to Old Iron Tail Blunt, but the major kept

out of his sight until the last minute, then he came strolling up beside the rig while Denton was waiting for the girl to bring something else out of the house.

"You know how it is here, Dave," Blunt kept his voice low. "It ain't what I'd call happy at best. I don't know what I'm going to do with Briss, hanged if I do. Bell will want to court martial him, but both are so confounded much to blame I don't know what'll come out of it."

"Will you do me a favor?" Denton reached down and put a hand on the major's shoulder. "And not ask too many questions?"

"I ain't good at promising too much, Dave."

"Keep Bell in the post just one week, Major," Denton was looking at him steadily. "Just a week to give me time to pick up a little more strength for something I want to do."

"You ain't afraid of him coming to Horsethief looking for you!"

"That would be a pleasure!" Denton grinned. "It's something more important than that."

The girl was coming now. Blunt helped her up. Trailed by eight troopers and a supply wagon, they headed up the river trail with Silver Bullet behind the buckboard. For the first mile everything seemed gloomy, except for the soldiers. Foote was back there, and the moment they were out of sight and hearing of the post the men started laughing from something Foote was telling them.

"I suppose you're happy?" The girl looked up quickly. "I imagine the men are laughing over the fight."

"I'd be pretty happy with you around most anywhere." He turned, looking at her steadily. "Yes, that's right." He nodded almost grimly. "I was in love with your picture before you came, and now that you're here, well, it's that much deeper, I guess."

"That's nice." She looked up the river thoughtfully. "Women must be at a premium out here. Captain Bell asked me to marry him, just yesterday afternoon on the major's front porch."

"Right good of Balty!" Denton grinned. "Wonder how you'd look in black?"

"What do you mean, David!" She looked at him suddenly. "Not—"

"Widow's weeds? Yes." He was smiling when he nodded.

"David, I think you're about half brute!"

"I'm a perfect brute, Miss Jessie."

"That's a bold admission. Just after as good as telling a woman you want to marry her!"

"I never said anything about wanting to marry you." His face had become long and serious, almost cruel. "After you're through out here you can go back to Virginia and get yourself a tea-sipper—with a little white-powder patted into his sideburns for dignity's sake. You are no woman for me. I love you mostly, I guess, for Phil's sake. I never had a friend like Phil."

"You still believe he had more gold than Captain Bell found!"

"No, ma'am." He grinned. "I refuse to believe he had a dollar more than Bell found on Bad Water. I think Bell found forty-four thousand. One of these days I hope to be able to prove it."

WHEN Horsethief lay ahead Denton saw that the last finishing touch had been added to the bridge spanning the river. The town, like all of them out here, had been growing steadily.

Just across the bridge, made of log and stone, Phil Lane's huge store on the north side of the street was finished.

"That's Phil's dream." Denton said.

She had no chance to answer.

The roar of a shot came from the Golden Skillet on the south side of the street just as Denton spoke to the girl. The people on the watering trough leaped up, those on one side springing away from each other, the others dropping to their hands and knees behind the trough. Denton halted the buckboard quickly in front of the big store.

"Better get inside!" he snapped, helping the girl down. "It's a fight and you never know how far it's going to go!"

The shooting was coming rapidly now, one shot after another, sometimes three or four together. A man in uniform had appeared, slowly walking backward. He was hatless, hair a wild red mop, the left sleeve of his coat torn loose at the shoulder. In each hand was a six-shooter. It took a second for Denton to recognize him, then he saw that it was Lieutenant Grover Shafter from Fort Six.

Shafter kept backing, kept shooting straight into the Golden Skillet. It was bedlam inside, women screaming, men yelling, chairs and tables overturning, everybody trying to find cover except a few who were shooting back at Shafter, making little puffs of dust jump from his clothing as their bullets struck him.

It was amazing to see a man carry so much lead and still walk. Shafter was almost at the watering trough before he went down, bullets still smashing into him.

LIEUTENANT Grover Shafter had sixteen bullet holes in him when they picked him up. Denton's job for the next hour was to keep the soldiers from going into the Golden Skillet and turning the whole town into a roaring gunfight. He had Foote to rely on. Foote was cool headed. Between him and Denton the battle was avoided.

Jessie Lane had gone on upstairs. The living quarters up there were all set and waiting for her, the furniture in, the stove up and a fire started. Lanky old George Hutton and his wife, Hattie, people who had worked for Phil on the Yellowstone, were on hand.

"It's the best way to start out," Denton told the girl when he had a chance to go upstairs and see her. "There are any number of men here who'll be ready to buy you out."

"You keep talking about my selling, David." She looked at him with a smile. "I've made up my mind that I'm going to like this country."

"I thought you might." He chuckled. "If you go away you always have a sort of an ache to come back to old Montana Territory. It's a great land, far and wide and as high as the stars in places."

"By the way," his attitude was suddenly going sour, "I hear that Lieutenant Shafter lost five thousand dollars in the Golden Skillet before he kicked back his chair and came up shooting. I'm curious to know where he got all that money. When we passed through Fort Six on our way to Laramie I heard Old Iron Tail Blunt giving him fits about not being able to pay up his bills."

"But that would be no reason for them to murder him!"

"They didn't murder him," he frowned.

"He brought it on himself. He killed a gambler across the table from him, then another player to his right, and then started throwing lead all over the place. There were seven people down when he backed out the front door. A girl they call Tinkle Toes was shot through the arm, and another little trick they call Dancy Sugar was nipped on the ear. They had to kill him. . . . He was with Balty Bell, you know, when they went for the gold."

"David," she looked at him narrowly, "must you go on thinking Captain Bell's a thief?"

"Time will tell."

It was the last time he was going to mention it, and from then on he made it a point to keep away from her as much as possible.

When Saturday morning came he watched them open the store. The counters and shelves had been filled. Expecting the rush, George Hutton had hired two more clerks. They were all worn out and ready to drop when nightfall came and the doors were closed.

Dave Denton had taken no part in it. He wanted no counter-jumping, and had flatly told them that. During the day he had bought a new saddle and a tall, black horse. After the store had closed he told no one what he was going to do. He went out to the corrals and stables behind the warehouse and saddled the black. When he rode away in the darkness he had a new rifle balanced across his lap, and old Chief Buffalo Bull's snakeskin hung to his saddle.

The ill-fated camp on Bad Water Creek would have been sixty miles away if he had followed the river trail. He wanted no part of the river trail just now. He took a short cut, winding his way down among the tall hills where a wagon train could never have gone. When dawn came like a curtain being rolled up from the eastern sky he was at the camp.

Buzzards, wolves and coyotes had done a fair job at cleaning up the bodies of the stock, but the odor of death was still here. The Indians had taken about everything of value before they had left the scene. Here and there were broken-open trunks and boxes that had been dragged out of the burning wagons by greedy red hands. He grimaced when he saw a little blue hat with a red feather in it that some redskin had

disdainfully hung on top of a bush. He had liked the freckle-faced girl of eight who had taken so much pride in the funny little hat.

The holes were left open at the places where the gold had been. The buffalo skull was there, the sightless eyes staring. Captain Bell had pitched his camp about a mile upstream to be out of range of the smell. Denton was not long in locating the captain's campsite right on the edge of the creek bank. He went over the ground carefully. Keen eyes were not long in finding the spot of ground where the captain's eight-by-ten tent had been pitched. The buffalo grass was thick and green again. Only the sharpest eye could have noticed the spot about a foot square that was not quite as green as the rest.

He turned, looked all around, and then dropped to his hands and knees. The grass was tough and held for a moment. When it came up a large clod of sod came with it. In a hole below it was an army blanket carefully rolled around something. He knew what was in that blanket before he touched it.

A sardonic smile was on his face when he was ready to go. The blanket was back in the hole, filled with rocks now, instead of coined gold. He replaced the sod and the grass carefully, and even went down to the creek to fill the great brim of his hat full of water to spill on it. Ten thousand dollars now rode in his new saddle bags. He had to laugh when he rode away, heading straight to Fort Six now. He had something he wanted to whisper in Old Iron Tail Blunt's hairy ear.

Captain Baltimore Bell was going to have one hell of a joke staring him in the face when he came back to his hole. When he opened it and spread aside the folds of the blankets he would find the rocks and a note waiting there for him. The note was short and to the point. It read:

You are still ten thousand dollars short, Balty.

D. Denton

CHAPTER

6

Clean Haul

Old Iron Tail himself came banging across Horsethief's new wagon bridge Thursday morning, riding as if the

saddle under him was afire. Behind him was Troop B, every man cursing him without a doubt. Denton was upstairs with Jessie Lane. They sat at a table on a little balcony above the front porch.

Blunt must have seen them up there, but his eyes were straight to the front. He took his troop up the street like a storm. In front of the Golden Skillet he thrust up his hand. The dust from all those horses jamming to a quick halt behind him blotted out everything for a minute. An orderly was holding his horse and Blunt was inside when the dust lifted.

"He acted as mad as thunder!" exclaimed the girl, brushing dust from her blue dress. "What a cloud he started!"

"Don't brush now," Denton grinned. "Another cloud's coming."

Blunt had not been in the Golden Skillet five minutes before he was reappearing, still the old mad rooster. Troop B's first sergeant had followed him inside. The sergeant was right behind him, carrying a stout buckskin bag now. Old Iron Tail could do business quickly when his bile was stirred. Afterwards Denton knew that he had conducted it in the Golden Skillet with a cocked gun in his gnarled old fist and the muzzle of the weapon planted firmly in the big, jelly-soft belly of one very red-faced and heavily mustached Sidney Sailor.

"Don't brush until you know they've left town for good," Denton was still grinning. "Here he comes, the devil, horn and tail! He'll bust himself out of his pants if he keeps that up."

Blunt was back in his saddle, the head of his troop curving and coming after him. He had seen Denton and the girl up there. He banged up in front of the porch of the store. This time he remembered to give a command in a voice that was like ripping planks from a house.

"Troop—halt!"

He hit the ground as if hating the feel of the earth. He pounded up the steps, across the porch, then they heard him on the stairs, trying to stomp holes in the new wood. When he reached the balcony he had a buckskin bag in each hand.

"There!" he snapped, banging the two bags on the table. Then before he would say another word he took out his handkerchief, blew the dust from his nose with the

noise of a honking gander, and pulled a pint of whiskey from his hip pocket. "Five I made Sid Sailor give back, and the five I got from him. That makes it, I guess." He banged himself in a chair, then let out a yell to curl one's hair as he glanced over the railing at the waiting troop below: "Fall out for thirty minutes!"

"But—but," stammered the amazed girl, staring at the bags, "what's the meaning of all this?"

"You ain't told 'er?" Blunt glowered at Denton. "You didn't give 'er the money you got back?"

"I thought I'd wait for you to tell it." Denton had to laugh at him. "Cut loose. She didn't put much stock in my belief. The ten thousand I got is downstairs in the strongbox."

"That's like you." Blunt honked his nose again, then grabbed his bottle. He took the cork out. "I need a drink, damn it!" He downed half the whiskey in his bottle before he lowered it from his lips. "Bell did steal twenty thousand dollars from you, Jessie. Him, and that Shafter who got his carcass full of lead the day you came to Horsethief. I made Sid Sailor cough up. He knows his cards are marked, and knows I know it. He knew Shafter had stolen the money somewhere, too."

"David," Iron Tail was suddenly grinning from ear to ear, "you should have seen Bell's face when he pulled up that blanket full of rocks and saw the note you'd left for him. He was so mad I thought we were going to have to shoot him when I rode out of the bushes with Billy Kennedy and his top sergeant. I never did see a man so mad! I'll swear he was chewing his tongue just like a mad-dog."

"Go back to the beginning, please!" cried the girl. "I can't make head or tail of it."

Denton told her of his trip back to Bad Water Creek. He told her what he had found there, and then of quietly riding into Fort Six after circling it to make it appear that he had come down from Horsethief.

Then Denton sat back and waited for Blunt to go ahead.

The old man finished his bottle and flung it into the river. He was grinning now. "Well, Jessie, I took over from there. I set a watch on Bad Water. Day before yesterday I was tired of waiting. I ordered

Bell to take his outfit down the valley to meet another wagon train. I'd told him a lie about having orders to send one of my best men to Miles City for duty on the Yellowstone. Naturally, he knew he'd be the one to go to Miles, and he was to have started today—if it hadn't been a lie. All I did was to give 'im a chance to get back to his hole. He broke down and told it all before I sent him to the guard-house, blaming the most of it on Shafter, of course! He'd given Shafter five thousand that night, and he'd taken five. They were afraid to try to bring the whole twenty thousand back into the post. It was just too damn bulky. Bell sent me his resignation this morning. I've heliographed the whole tale to headquarters on the Big Horn. By the time I get back to Fort Six I'll have orders to kick him off the reservation. I think that's the best way out. Nobody's sorry to see him go."

"Jardin—*Sergeant Jardin!*" His voice jumped to a startling yell. A soldier across the street snapped to attention. Blunt flung him a silver dollar. "Go get me another pint of whiskey!"

THIRTEEN weeks was a long time to wait for vengeance—a long time for a man who ached body and soul to kill. Balty Bell had waited, making himself a fine-aided dandy now in golden-yellow buckskins, and cursing each day as he waited. On Army kick-out and doomed to wear the brand until his dying day, he had gone south with a little black-dog rake known as Jasper Drake, a supposed buffalo hunter. Drake had ten huge buffalo wagons with foot-wide iron tires, each drawn by eight stout yokes of oxen.

It was a dirty mess and not the outfit where one would expect to find Baltimore Bell, but there was plenty of money in it. Drake and his little gang could go into the hills and come out in a week or ten days with every wagon piled high with buffalo hides. No other buffalo hunter in the country could kill and skin his loads so quickly.

As a matter of fact Jasper Drake never had to shoot and skin a buffalo. One wagon-load of guns and the ammunition, and a couple of barrels of Indian rum, took care of all that. Indians took the guns and waited for him at certain places with the

hides piled up. For a twenty-dollar gun he received about a thousand dollars worth of the pick of hides.

A man could do that with seven or eight hundred Indians and their squaws working for him. Not even the Indians knew—and would not have cared if they had known—that the handsome, slick-as-a-pin Baltimore Bell was Jasper Drake's half-brother.

But no man—least of all Balty Bell—could have hoped for the sweetness of revenge that came to him that frosty morning in a narrow, rock-ribbed little canyon twenty miles southwest of Horsethief. He had heard that the new town had held an election and Dave Denton had been elected marshal and had started a general clean-up to make gambling games straight. And now Balty Bell saw his revenge coming toward him in that canyon below.

For twenty Indians, riding like devils on horseback, were chasing Denton along the floor of the canyon. Denton was on Silver Bullet. Jessie Lane was on his tall black horse and was racing along just ahead of him. Denton's long six-shooters, rocking and blasting in his hands, were giving those pursuing redskins something to think about.

Chief Buffalo Bull was probably the only one around the hide-loaded wagons who sensed a slight pinch of regret. His keen old eyes knew the Yellow Hair at a mile away. It had been in Fort Laramie a year ago that the old chieftain had come in contact with Denton. Garbed like a dirt-poor old buck, Buffalo Bull had been in town to see what he could see and hear. A drunken bullwhacker had jumped on him for no reason at all. The Yellow Hair had pushed the man back. The bullwhacker had turned on him. Yellow Hair had knocked him sprawling with his fist. And the bullwhacker had come up, going for his guns. Four fast balls of lead had laid the bullwhacker down for good the second time.

The whole thing had not lasted more than fifteen seconds. When it was over and the smoke cleared away Buffalo Bill had slipped away among the wagons and back to his tiny little camp a mile out of town where two of his youngest squaws waited for him. The snakeskin had been his pay-back. There on the banks of the Bad Water he had been able to hold his men. The devil, himself, could not hold

them here with their bellies filled with Drake's Indian rum.

Yellow Hair had seen the wagons and the danger. Buffalo Bull's little beads of eyes lighted deep in their sunken and wrinkled sockets when he watched the white mare make her turn behind the black. Yellow Hair was swinging to the east side of the canyon to make his stand under the overhanging rocks there.

Buffalo Bull's manner had not changed. Only the lighting of the old eyes was there. But Baltimore Bell was throwing a fit. He had grabbed a long buffalo rifle and now started blazing away at Denton. He fired a couple of shots to try to lift him out of his saddle. He fired the next four at Silver Bullet.

Indians from the camp were already grabbing ponies and streaking forward. They had been drinking rum and looking at their new guns only a short time ago. Now they were yelling like paint-smeared maniacs and going out to try their guns.

Bell was swearing and hollering for a horse when Jasper Drake came up and grabbed him by the arm. Bell was about to sling him away when he saw that Drake was pointing to the rim of the cliffs to eastward and so excited now he could not open his mouth to speak.

"Soldier man come," growled Buffalo Bull. "On top rocks."

Bell turned and stared now, then swore raspingly. Only about twenty troopers were up there, merely a scouting patrol and no match for all these redskins.

"Calm yourself, damn it!" Drake could speak now and was sawing at Bell's arm again. "It's through for you and me if Old Iron Tail Blunt gets his eye on these wagons. He'll know it all and take over, and if he gets his hands on us—it's a firing squad sure as hell. Let the redskins handle this and we'll try to pull out of here. I've got seventy-five hundred dollars tied up in those wagons, and that doesn't count the cattle."

"I'm going to see Dave Denton die!" snarled Bell. "You talk to old Buffalo Bull about the girl. She looks damned good to me!"

"You damned fool!" yelled Drake. "That woman alive would be poison. Look! Denton's in the rocks and opening up."

It was a moment after that that the world

appeared to shake and the very heavens start to tremble. It came from down the canyon in one long-chattering blast, a sound that made Baltimore Bell's hair rise. He knew that sound—would have known it in hell!

The first sound was followed by another, this time from up the canyon. A cheer lifted from the soldiers on the cliffs above Denton and the girl. Now another sound flung up from the west.

"Bugles!" croaked Bell. "They're all around us!"

DAVE DENTON had to stop fighting long enough to yell. Old Iron Tail Blunt had pulled a fast one. Every redskin and renegade white in the canyon was in a trap here. Troop B was swinging down the canyon. Troop D at the old man's heels was coming up. Troop C had been divided. On the east rim were only a handful of men merely to attract and hold all attention there.

Down there in the rocks Denton and the girl had a ringside seat for the fireworks. Denton had killed four bucks when they had been fools enough to charge him. Now all of them were falling back in their desperation and trying to hug the little creek.

The firing was growing from the east rim as well as the west as more and more cavalymen came up. Down the canyon the bugle rolled and sobbed. Old Iron Tail was swinging out his men and coming in for the kill. Up the canyon Troop B answered, coming like hell tearing the roof off and knocking the rafters down.

There was no hope for old Buffalo Bull's men from the start. The man was too wise not to know it. He tried to rally them. He had jumped astride of a spotted pony, a magnificent figure in his flowing war-bonnet and his death song on his lips as he rode to meet Blunt. It was no more than two minutes later before a hail of rifle balls tore him off his pony and dropped the pony dead beside him. Old Iron Tail and his howling hellions swept over him into the thick of it.

Denton had never seen such fury as unbridled itself in the next twenty minutes of fighting. He had come into the canyon with the girl and two men looking for a new site and new timber for the saw mill

on the river. The two men had been behind and no doubt had made good their escape back to Horsethief.

Never had Denton expected to see Old Iron Tail here. The old man was at his meanest. Indians were dying everywhere. Renegade whites went down with them. It was a surprise to see about two hundred of the younger bucks throwing down their weapons and getting together in little wads with their hands held high above their heads. Buffalo Bull's followers were not in the habit of surrendering like that, but the younger bucks saw the folly of simply dying.

Baltimore Bell was forgotten for the time. Denton had seen him start toward the rocks. Bell had wheeled and fallen back as if a rifle bullet from the rim had caught him. The girl saved Denton's life now as they arose and started moving back to Silver Bullet and the black horse, both safe there in the rocks.

"Drop!" Jessie Lane gave him a shove and dropped herself as she screamed. "It's Bell!"

It was fast work and had to be. The most of the girl's words were lost in the sudden roar of a six-shooter. Dave Denton could understand that kind of talk. Bell was still shooting, but the rocks and brush right here spoiled his aim. His first bullet would have centered Denton's skull if it had not been for the girl.

For the next minute it was a game of hide and seek. Bell was moving back and back. He had fired one shot in the general direction of the girl. Denton had caught just one good glimpse of his face, and saw that he had gone absolutely mad.

Baltimore Bell knew what was going to happen to him when Old Iron Tail Blunt got his hands on him. Blunt was already taking care of a dozen of the whites who had surrendered down there. Iron Tail Blunt killed men who sold guns to Indians—and to hell with what Washington might say about it. He had lined the twelve men alongside the gun wagon, and a roar of shots had cut them down.

By crawling through the rocks and bushes, Bell thought he had the advantage. He was above Denton now.

Backing slowly behind a long, tall slab of rock Bell saw his chance. Denton's

shadow had appeared. Six-shooters cocked, Bell brought them up, holding his breath now. Just to make him steadier he took another short pace backward—and a yell tore out of him, both six-shooters blazing as he shot forward as if his back had suddenly been broken.

Balty Bell had forgotten Silver Bullet there in the rocks. He had backed into her heels, and Silver Bullet had let fly. Before he could come up, before he could re-cock his weapons, he saw Dave Denton wheel around the rocks. Denton was grinning when he spoke:

"All right, Bailty, look me in the eye."

Eyes wide and wild, Balty Bell tried to come up shooting, but he fumbled his guns. Only one shot roared there in the rocks. Bell fell like a snake trying to jerk back into its hole.

Denton stood there, eyeing him for just a second, and then moved on to Silver Bullet and the black horse. When he walked down the hill he was leading the horse and the mare behind. His left arm was around the girl, holding her tightly to him.

"Take a look at Buffalo Bull." It was Blunt's first order when he saw him and told him what had happened to Bell. "I'm still curious about that snakeskin medicine sling."

Denton recognized the old face when he saw it. Briefly, he told Blunt about the old Indian.

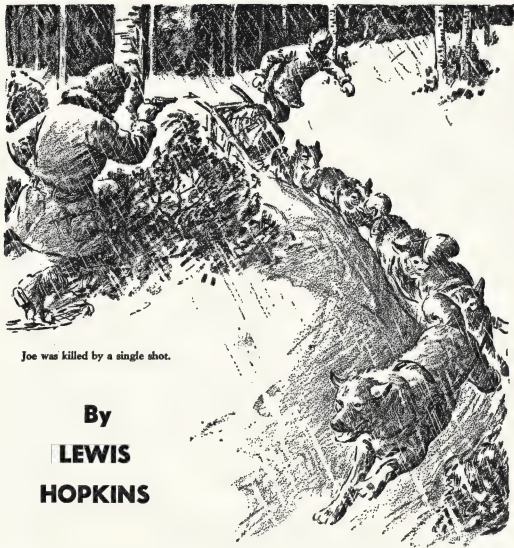
The major nodded. "I figured it was something like that, David. We've made a clean haul here. You and Jessie'll have to come back by Fort Six with us. Nancy'll be glad to see you. I think," he was grinning suddenly as he looked at the girl, "Jessie's got something in her eye. I hope me and Nancy'll be invited to the wedding and the fixings."

And then, giving them no chance to open their mouths, he turned and stalked away. Black-bearded little Jasper Drake had been hiding in a hole in the rocks. Troopers had found him and had pulled him out by the heels. Old Iron Tail Blunt gave a two-word order:

"Shoot 'im!"

Denton and the girl were behind a big wagon in each other's arms when they heard the guns crash. Neither knew what had happened—and cared less.

NORTH TO HELL



Joe was killed by a single shot.

By
**LEWIS
HOPKINS**

• • •
*Nick Larson made his kill—and only
the blasting north wind heard his
chuckle of triumph.*
• • •

ALTHOUGH under temporary arrest, Nick Larson felt free and easy as he sat in the marshal's office. His untroubled gaze shifted to a window where the falling snow appeared like a slanting curtain. Beyond that white screen stretched hundreds of square miles of primeval forests, hills and ravines. Nick Larson knew that country well. Marshal Lawes' said: "Joe Jacques and I were brought up together, Larson. I mean to hang the man who killed him."

"That's your job, Marshal. But don't try to pin Joe's killing on me," retorted Nick, making a forced grin that drew back his thin lips to show long yellow teeth. "You just saw me turn in my winter catch of furs to Trader Slagin. Why didn't you let him pay me for 'em instead of makin' me come here?"

The marshal drawled his answer. "A murder's been done, and I'm watchin' every fur sale. Understand, I ain't blamin' Joe's killin' on you, but I've told Trader Slagin to check over your pelts and bring me a list for my records."

"When Slagin brings you that list and pays me, I'm hittin' the trail out of here," growled Nick Larson.

Lawes finger-locked his hands behind his head. "You ain't very sociable. I figured we could get better acquainted while we were waitin' for Slagin to come. Let's see, you only came here last fall. Is that right?"

"Yep," snapped Nick, turning his head with a jerk to stare again at the falling snow. That heavy snowfall was helping him. It was covering the wilderness spot where, at dawn, he had ambushed Joe Jacques and sent him sprawling face down, dead from a single shot.

The marshal said: "I reckon the feller who murdered Joe did a mighty slick job of coverin' his tracks. He prob'ly hid Joe's body and slid in a covert, and killed Joe's dogs—except the one that got away wounded. Then I figger the killer mixed Joe's pelts in with his own so's he could sell 'em in a single lot and avoid suspicion. Does that make sense to you?"

Nick chopped a nod in the lawman's direction. "It sure does, Marshal. But I should think a killer as clever as that would be hard to catch. He'd leave no evidence for you to work on."

"'Fraid so," agreed Lawes, lapsing into silence.

Inwardly Nick Larson chuckled. It was true that the marshal had reasoned out the things he had done after the killing, but what the marshal did not know was that Trader Slagin, to whom Nick had turned over his furs, was Nick's secret partner in the murder of Joe Jacques. They had planned it together.

Fake sales, like this one, were the way Nick and Slagin concealed their profitable

and sinister business. Nick recalled that it was the fifth time this season he had "sold" Slagin pelts stolen from different trappers. but Joe Jacques was the only one he had been forced to kill.

The marshal said quietly: "Joe's murderer made a big mistake when he only wounded Joe's lead-dog, instead of killin' it with the others. If that hurt dog hadn't escaped and come here to the trading post we wouldn't have known of Joe's murder."

A nod came from Nick, but he remained silent.

THE stamping of booted feet outside the office made Nick turn and look at the opening door. Trader Tom Slagin clumped into the office. After brushing the snow from his shoulders with mittened fingers he nodded brusquely at the marshal.

"Here's that list of furs you asked for," boomed the trader, handing a paper to Lawes. "Shall I pay him now?"

When the marshal nodded, Slagin passed Nick a roll of bills. He winked as he said: "Here's your money, Larson. You brought in some extra fine pelts." Turning to Lawes, he asked: "What was your idea of bringin' this man here?"

"Larson came in first over the trail after the wounded dog," replied the marshal, matter-of-factly. Then he asked: "Did you personally check over Larson's furs?"

"Sure I did," rumbled Slagin. "They're choice furs anyone would be—" He bit off his words, eyed the marshal with a dubious stare. "What did you think I'd find?"

Nick Larson quickly turned his head to hide a smile when Marshal Lawes seemed at a loss for words.

Marshal Lawes said in an apologetic tone: "Mind if I ask you a few questions, Slagin, before I turn Larson loose?"

Slagin shook his head. "Ask me anythin' you want."

Lawes looked at his pipe, then cleared his throat. "Would you say you carefully checked Larson's pelts?"

The trader scowled. "Sure, I checked 'em, and my clerk Tracy helped me do it. An' you've got the list we made together."

A weary sigh came from the marshal, and he ran his hand over his brow. "Then I reckon you fellers know all about Larson's furs."

Nick Larson's small eyes glittered as he

made ready to rise from his chair to leave the office. Slagin had sprung the law-trap! Should he make a start to go? Not yet, he told himself, when the marshal smiled pleasantly at Slagin and asked:

"Tom, didn't you once tell me you never traded with Indians?"

Nick noticed that his partner's hostile manner faded with the marshal's new display of friendliness. "That's right," Slagin admitted. "Indians bring in a lot of furs, but they're too sharp in their tradin' to suit me. I've kept clear of 'em. That's the reason I came here—there ain't any Indians."

Slagin started to ask a question but stopped short and glowered when a tall, lean man, dressed in fur coat and overalls, entered the office. He was carrying two boxes of furs.

The newcomer said: "I've separated Larson's pelts as you wanted, Marshal. Things turned out the way we expected." As he spoke, the man placed the two boxes on Lawes' desk.

"Thanks, Tracy." The marshal chuckled to himself.

Nick gave a startled jump when Slagin's sudden bellow roared in the small room. "What are you doin' here, Tracy? Why ain't you tendin' store?"

"Thought I'd take a little rest, boss," replied Tracy with a grin. "You see, I'm quittin' my job with you to go back to this." Drawing aside his coat and overalls, Tracy displayed a silver badge. "I'm a Fur Dealers' detective."

Nick's glance flashed from Tracy to Slagin—then to the marshal who had come from behind his desk and was approaching him. In the next split-second the marshal's fingers darted out, steel flashing from them. Before Nick could draw back, he felt the encircling grip of handcuffs around his wrists. As though from a great distance he heard Lawes say:

"You're under arrest for the murder of Joe Jacques."

Things were happening too fast for Nick to comprehend. But one thought smote him—Slagin had double-crossed him to save his own neck.

Leaping from his chair, Nick lurched across the room toward the ashen-faced Slagin and yelled: "Here I've been thinkin' you're a partner I could trust! Why you—"

"Shut up, you idjit!" bellowed Slagin.

"Them lawdogs ain't got a thing on you. It's a bluff!"

Marshal Lawes broke in: "I don't use handcuffs for bluffin'. You both know it. Nick's goin' to hang."

"Then Slagin's goin' to hang, too," shrilled Nick. "He planned Joe Jacques' murder with me. He's a double-crossin'—"

He stopped short and plunged sideways when Slagin's hand streaked to his gun. The click of a pulled trigger sounded futilely in the room.

"Like to try that again?" chuckled Lawes, pulling a second pair of handcuffs from his pocket.

"Don't sprain your trigger finger," advised Detective Tracy. "You can't shoot without bullets, Slagin. I unloaded your gun before you came here."

Another click came when the marshal snapped the bracelets on Slagin.

"Well, if you ain't the dumbest pair of killers!" Lawes exclaimed. "You, Nick, brought in the evidence to hang yourself. Now, your talkin's tied Slagin in with the murder, just as I was expectin'."

Turning, Lawes frowned at Slagin. "And you, nitwit, put the noose around your own neck by failin' to hide the evidence your partner Nick brought in. The Fur Dealers' Association have been watching you two for a long time, but up to now you've been slick enough to cover your tracks. The law's finally caught up with you fellers."

The marshal walked back to the two boxes on his desk and picked up a pelt from each. One fur was shapeless and wrinkled; the other, long and smooth. "See the difference 'tween these? You fellers forgot I've known Joe Jacques since he was a boy."

"So what?" growled Nick.

"This is what—come over here and take a look," said Marshal Lawes mildly. "These are the furs you brought in this mornin'—only Detective Tracy sorted them into two lots. The long, smooth pelts in this box are your own, Larson—they're cured the white man's way."

Lawes pointed to the other container. "But you also brought in these wrinkled pelts, mixed in with your own. They belonged to Joe Jacques—before you killed him!"

"How do I know? Because Joe Jacques was a half-breed—the only trapper in these parts who cured his furs the Indian way."

POWDERSMOKE WISDOM

Chris was a no-good
bully. . . .



By G. S.
PAYNE

Tim had his father's murderer trapped, bundled up to deliver to the devil—and then he made a strange bargain.

I WAS just twelve when big Chris Tolliver killed Pap, and it was like the sun had gone out of the sky. Chris was a no-good bully. He owned a little, run-down outfit to the north of our spread there on Turkey Creek.

The fight between Pap and Chris Tolliver happened at the Springtown settlement, where Pap had gone with a sack of shelled corn for the grist-mill. There were just two witnesses, and they both were cronies of Chris'—so the real straight of what happened never was known. Chris and the others claimed Pap had got soused on corn likker, picked a fuss with Chris and tried to knife him. They claimed Chris had hit back, in self-defense, that Pap had stumbled and fallen and hit his head against the edge of a boulder and died.

If the jury had known Pap like I did they'd have known it was a filthy lie. Pap was the bravest, kindest man on earth. He never took more'n two drinks of corn likker, and if he had he wouldn't have knifed anybody, not even Chris Tolliver. But the jury didn't know that, so they turned Chris loose. I never will forget the way Chris laughed and strutted when the jury gave the verdict of not guilty. I swore right then that I'd make him pay.

But I never let on to Mom. I couldn't understand the way she took it. She didn't cry, at least not where I could see her. She was quiet and pale, like she was all frozen up inside.

"You're the only man I've got now,

Tim," she said. "I want you to be a good one. When worms start workin' in an apple it goes bad. Remember that."

I knew she was trying to tell me not to hold thoughts of vengeance against Chris Tolliver. But I couldn't help it.

Mom and me done the best we could there alone on the ranch. And it wasn't long before I found out somebody was stealing our cattle, one or two at a time. I was pretty sure it was Chris Tolliver. I found places where the fence between our places had been cut and cows driven through. But I didn't go to the law. I set out to catch him.

And finally, one day a little before sundown, I done it.

He was on our land, in the thick timber bordering Turkey Creek. He'd built a fire in a little clearing. He had two of our young steers hogtied—and he had a wet blanket and a running iron. I had him cold.

He saw that, when I stepped out of the bushes at the edge of the clearing. Chris was a big, dark-faced man with the meanest black eyes I ever saw. When he saw me he yelled a curse, jumped away from the steer and flung the blanket and running iron among some weeds.

"That won't help you, Chris Tolliver," I said. "I got you dead to rights, this time."

"Look, button, let's talk this over," he coaxed. "How'd you like to own a brand-new twenty dollar bill?"

I said, "Not half so much as I'd like to see you in jail. I'm goin' straight to the sheriff—"

"Like hell you will!" he growled, and made a dive for me.

I ducked back into the brush.

He yelled, "Wait, kid. . . . I don't aim to hurt you!"

But I knew better. I could hear him crashing through the thicket behind me. Once, as I crossed a little glade, he shot at me. The bullet cut a twig inches from my head. I knew he didn't aim for me to tell what I'd seen.

I came to Turkey Creek. It was narrow, no more than twenty feet across, shallow and covered with a green scum. I looked back. Chris was just coming out of the timber. He yelled something at me and flourished the gun.

I slid down the low bank and dove into the shallow water. I splashed across the creek on my stomach. When I reached the far bank I looked back. Chris had just come up to the water. He shot at me again as I scrambled up out of the water and into the underbrush.

Then Chris Tolliver leaped down the bank and into the creek. He started splashing across. But he wasn't swimming. He was on his feet, splashing, trying to run in the shallow water. And that's where he made his mistake. Gradually, he slowed, stopped, like his feet were caught in a vise.

HE STOOD there a moment, eyes gone blank with surprise as he looked down at the muddy water. Then all at once he seemed to realize the truth, and he started churning the water like a trapped grizzly. But it was no use—the quicksand had hold of him and was pulling him down.

I saw he'd lost his gun. I came back out of the brush and stood there watching him. After a while he realized that his fierce struggles were only dragging him deeper. He quieted, and looked over at me, and I'll never forget what I saw in his eyes.

It was more than terror, more than despair and desolation. I saw his soul, stripped naked and craven and ugly.

He moaned, "Kid, help me outa here!

This devilish stuff's pullin' me down—I can't get out!"

"You killed Pap," I said.

"It was an accident, I swear it was! . . . You tricked me—you knew this quicksand was here. You made me chase you, so I'd blunder into it!"

"I said I'd get even with you, for killin' Pap. Now I'll do it!"

He started struggling again, but it did no good. The green-scummed water was up past his waist now. Alone, he could never get out. I felt kind of cold inside, watching him. It was like watching a dead man move about.

"Get that rope from my saddle back there, kid, and pull me out," he begged. "I—I'll do anything you say. . . . I'll give you a lot of money. . . . I don't want to die—"

"Pap didn't either," I said, and I turned and went back into the brush.

I could hear him moaning and begging back there in the creek. . . .

I started running. I recrossed the creek, higher up, and made it back to the clearing where Chris' horse was. I took the rope from his saddle and got back to the creek quick. The water was up nearly to his armpits.

When he saw me with the rope he started blubbering. "You're a good boy, Tim. . . . I knew you wouldn't let me die!"

I tied one end of the rope to a sapling, and flung the other end out to him. I knew he could pull himself out.

"You get out of the country, Chris Tolliver," I said. "If you ain't gone by sun-up, I'll go to the sheriff with what I know. Don't ever come back!"

I went back to the clearing, untied the two steers and drove them home. I told Mom what had happened. I was ashamed, and said:

"Pap'd tan me, if he was here. I had Chris Tolliver cold turkey, and I let him go. . . . I wasn't man enough to go through with it!"

Mom smiled, kind of soft and satisfied. "Pap'd be proud of you, like I am. If the worms are cleaned out of an apple while it's young, it'll grow to be ripe and good!"

It was a long time before I understood what she meant.

COWBOY FILM CORRAL

Behind the Scenes with the Western Stars

A review of Western pictures and players for you 10 STORY WESTERN fans.

When the Ernest Hemingway novel, "For Whom the Bell Tolls," was being filmed on location in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Bill Boyd was called upon to serve as technical advisor in regard to the handling of guns. Although many members of the Hemingway cast are masters with their trigger fingers, the Producer wanted to study various gunning techniques. That's why he sent for Boyd. He felt that anyone who handled guns as expertly as Boyd does in the "Hopalong" Cassidy films should be able to lend valuable aid in the shooting episodes. Bill's current film is "Hoppy Serves A Writ."



Buster Crabbe says that Western action dramas must carry at least two good scraps in order to satisfy the fans.

In "Blazing Frontier" Buster worked out a brace of sizzling fights with the heavies that are as good as anything to be seen on the screen today. A lot of planning goes into these fights in order to make them different.

Buster works out rehearsals with his opponent, and together they develop a routine that is bound to result in a sizzling set-to in which the hero takes as much as he gives.

These screen fights often result in pretty bad injuries that require the doctor's care for one or the other of the scrappers. So the big fight stuff is left to the last, so in case either man gets an injury it will not hold up production.

The heavies who go up against Buster are all men weighing close to 200 pounds or over, and as hard as rocks. Such scrappers as Charles King and Kermit Maynard are among the toughest men on the screen. They enjoy the rough action as much as Crabbe himself.

Here's the story of "Blazing Frontier."

When a feud develops between the settlers and the railroad detectives in Red Rock Valley, Clem Barstow, (Mil Kibbee) lawyer for the settlers, sends for Billy the Kid, (Buster Crabbe) and Fuzzy Jones, (Al St. John).

Buster and Fuzzy hire out as detectives in order to get evidence against Ward Tragg, chief of the railroad detectives.

Buster suspects that Tragg and Luther Sharp, land agent for the Western Railroad Company, are defrauding the settlers without the knowledge or sanction of their employer.

Buster and the settlers rustle off cattle, which has been confiscated by Tragg and his men, in order to raise money for Barstow to bid in a ranch which Sharp is auctioning off.

When Barstow receives his deed from the railroad company it is apparently in order, but Buster discovers that the purchase price recorded on the deed has been altered. Barstow writes to the railroad company, and they send out a representative to investigate.

When Tragg learns about this he plans to kidnap the railroad official to prevent him from meeting with Barstow. But Buster has ideas of his own—and puts them into action. . . .

KILL-MUSIC FOR THE KID

By ROBERT TURNER



Stud Lacey said: "Pick up that iron—and use it!"

Kid Smiles, one-time ace gunhawk, now went unarmed—to hunt a loud-mouthed killer.

HE WORE a flat-crowned, cream colored Stetson, tipped forward to shadow his eyes. Leather tie-strings were knotted loosely under a chin that was sharp and spade-square. He stood at the far end of Stud Lacey's saloon, drinking alone. A dozen men of Rockrim huddled together, ten feet away, speaking only once in awhile and then in undertones—but watching Kid Smiles all the while.

Gilligan, the barman, fat and bald and pouchy-eyed, had pursed his rosy little mouth and pulled his pussy-willow brows together in a frown the moment Kid Smiles had sauntered into the place. He had kept that same expression for a quarter of an hour now. There were only two more glasses to polish and Gilligan wondered what he'd do when they were finished. He'd have to keep busy. He'd have to act natural.

Gilligan every once in awhile caught some of the whispered comments of his regular customers. He wished they'd stop it. The Kid's ears might be sharper than they thought. It was going to be bad enough when his boss, Stud Lacey, came in—without a heap of serious trouble before that, too.

And Gilligan wished old Marco, the blind fiddler, sitting at his table at the back, would give it a rest for awhile. Ever since the Kid had first come in, gone back and talked for a moment with old Marco, the fiddler had played incessantly. The squeaky, high-pitched jig-time tunes were like a file rasping Gilligan's nerves.

If the Kid would only smile once, Gilligan thought, talk a little to the boys. The Kid had always smiled before he left Rockrim, three years ago. He'd never been like this. Even when he'd killed, the corners of his wide mouth had always lifted crookedly and the edges of his hot, bright little blue eyes had crinkled. But not today. The Kid had come back changed.

Meanwhile Kid Smiles sipped his rotgut, slowly, making wet, interlocking designs on the bar with the glass, between sips. He wasn't tossing it down like a man trying to fill himself with courage for a gunsmoke showdown.

Ben Hobbs, Rockrim's blacksmith, whispered to the red-whiskered old freighter next to him: "He's plumb loco, the Kid is, sendin' word to Stud Lacey to meet him here at three o'clock to see which one of 'em leaves town. And then him comin' here, completely unarmed!"

"Sure looks kinda nekkid, without them twin smokepoles he allus used to wear, slung around his hips," the freighter whispered back. He ducked his head between his arms resting on the bar, rocked the spittoon with a bull's-eye shot. "But I reckon the Kid's got suthin' up his sleeve.

That Kid allus was sharper'n a whittled stick. Maybe he's got a hideaway iron."

Down the bar aways, Ham Creegs, town barber, lazily polished his bald head with his hands, told the man next to him: "Jist plain slaughter, it's gonna be. I remember how slick that Kid used to be with a gun and I heard tell how since he went away to the gold camps, three years ago, he's even deadlier. But Stud Lacey kin do right well himself. Ain't no man faster on the draw than Stud. The Kid ain't got a chance, without no weapon. Lacey will smoke him down on sight and apologize afterward."

His neighbor, Rufus Bean, local printer and newspaper publisher, thought about that. It was stark truth. Before the Kid had gone away from Rockrim, he'd shot Stud Lacey's young brother, Al, in a fair-square gun fight. But Stud had sworn he'd get the Kid for that. The two of 'em would never live in the same town, he'd said.

RUFUS BEAN nodded, wisely, shot a quick sideways glance at the Kid. He still looked pretty much the same, with the sprouts of straw-colored hair over his ears, the thick cluster of freckles on his nose and cheeks. Only there was a quarter inch blond fuzz on his chin and upper lip now. And his cheeks were sunken some.

Old man Bean couldn't understand Kid Smiles. The lad had ridden long miles to see his mother, the local seamstress, sick on her deathbed many weeks, had come out of the house crying like a baby because she'd died in his arms.

And here, an hour later, he was fixing to do the very thing again that had broken the old lady's heart by degrees since he was fifteen and bought his first gun.

No woman in town had been more against violence and gunplay than Kid Smiles' mother. She'd hated it and fought it, all her life. And here she was hardly cold—Rufus Bean shook his grizzled head and wondered how a boy could do a thing like that—even a tough little gunny like the Kid.

The minute hand of the clock over the bar ticked its way to one minute to three. All talk at the bar tapered off. Old Marco had stopped his fiddle playing. There was nothing but silence, broken occasionally by the sound of men's feet shifting nervously and the soft swish of neckerchiefs mopping

sweating brows. The very air seemed to stand still except for dust motes swirling lazily in the shafts of hot afternoon sunlight pouring in above and below the batwings.

Suddenly that whirling dust seemed to explode, to dance like a dervish as the saloon doors slammed open and a man strode in. He was tall and gaunt, with a broken, twisted nose, drooping black mustaches and deeply sunken, agate-hard black eyes. He wore a black frock coat and fancy stitched boots and vest. Bone-handled .44's swung from his hips.

Tall and stooped, Stud Lacey stood there, just inside the doors, eyes flicking along the bar. He looked as though he was leaning against a heavy wind.

Abruptly, crazily, Old Marco started playing again. It was a wild, lilting, Irish song this time. Without looking toward the back where the blind man was, Stud Lacey snarled: "Cut that, you sightless old buzzard! Put that fiddle down!"

The music broke off in the middle of the note, with a protesting squawk of the bow against the strings. And then Stud Lacey moved, with long, deliberate steps, along the barroom toward the back where Kid Smiles was.

But the Kid didn't look at him. He slowly drained the bottom of his whiskey glass, set it back on the bar, carefully, soundlessly. He waited until Stud Lacey had reached the center of the saloon, at right angles to where the Kid stood at the bar. Then the Kid turned, hooked his elbows over the bar. The smile for which he was named slowly slid over his thin, boyish face.

His broad, humorous mouth curled slowly at the corners, forming dimples deep as bullet-scars. Freckles spread and widened across his pug nose. His little blue eyes seemed to dance and sparkle and their outer edges formed crinkly little lines. He looked like he would burst out with wild laughter any minute. But he never did.

Stud Lacey's hands were on his gun-butts, now. He said, through his teeth: "I hear yuh lookin' for me, Kid." Sunken black eyes flicked to the Kid's waist and hips. "Where's yore irons? What're you up to?"

Kid Smiles said, thin and high, but with a steady voice: "I'm not wearin' guns today, Stud. Figger I won't be needin' 'em. Figger I won't ever be needin' 'em

again. Sold 'em half hour ago to pay for Ma's funeral."

Lacey grinned and a gold incisor winked in the light. "Sorry to hear about that, Kid. But if yore plannin' to commit suicide from grief, this-away, it's all right with me."

The Kid's smile seemed to have become a frozen expression on his face, but he didn't answer. His elbows unhooked from the bar. He started edging sideways toward the batwing doors, so that soon Lacey was between him and the old, blind fiddler. His hands hung loose and awkward from his sleeves, against his thighs.

He had taken several paces, while Stud Lacey slowly turned, watched him, puzzled.

Then Lacey bawled: "Stand, Kid. Don't move another inch. You ain't gonna *walk* out of here!"

Without moving his eyes from the Kid's tense, slim figure, Stud Lacey addressed the men at the bar: "Someone toss the Kid an iron. I want him to have a fightin' chance."

No one moved. No one obeyed. Again Lacey spoke, an edge to his voice, this time. "You heard me!"

A black-handled .45 slid along the floor to the Kid's feet.

Stud Lacey said: "Pick up that iron—and use it!"

Without even looking at it, Kid Smiles kicked it back toward the bar. He said: "I'm takin' care of you with my bare hands, Stud."

HE STARTED walking slowly toward the lanky, dark man in the frock coat. From the bar came the sound of breath being sucked noisily in through teeth. From the back of the saloon, Old Marco nervously began tuning his violin. There was the squawk of the fiddle's tuning pegs tightening, occasionally the plink of ever-higher notes as Old Marco picked at a string.

Kid Smiles took three steps, came within six feet of Stud Lacey.

The tall man peeled back his lips, said shrilly: "All right, you grinning hyena, yuh asked for it!"

Lacey's long bony hands whipped the .44's from their leather, but that same instant, from behind Lacey came a sharp, loud crack of sound, like a shot, accompanied by a *twang!* Lacey, suspicious, nerves on

edge, jerked his whole lean body as though he'd been shot. Instead of firing at Kid Smiles, he spun on his heels and the .45's roared their death at the back of the saloon.

But Old Marco was sprawled flat on the floor, fiddle in his hand, the string broken by tightening it too far, sticking up in two pieces.

Kid Smiles landed full on Stud Lacey's stooped back. His fists chopped around and down in front of the tall man, knocked the still smoking guns crashing to the floor.

Both men went floundering to the floor, rolled over and over, fists pummeling, legs flailing. Stud Lacey, bigger, stronger, was the first to get to his feet. He grabbed up a chair and as the Kid surged up from his knees, sent it flying across the room. But the Kid lurched out of the way and the chair crashed harmlessly against the wall.

He stood waiting then, as Stud Lacey rushed him, swinging both long, powerful arms in murderous blows. He stepped lithely to one side and as Lacey rushed past, stabbed out a foot between the tall man's long legs.

Lacey slammed to the floor, rolled over slowly, got back to his feet, stunned, eyes a little glassy, weaving unsteadily on his legs. The Kid waited for a split second, stepped in, fainted with his right and shot a short, jolting left to Stud Lacey's mouth.

With a scream of rage Lacey came windmilling back at him. Kid Smiles ducked and came up and in close, under the blows, butted the larger man on the chin with his head.

Now Lacey stood there, knees sagging, and The Kid went to work on him. His fists moved like pistons. And after several moments it was only those jolting upper-

cut blows that held Lacey up. Soon even that failed and Kid Smiles missed his last punch. Because Stud Lacey wasn't there. He collapsed like a broken sack of meal.

The Kid stood there for a moment, his breathing ragged, his fists still clenched, the knuckles swollen and scraped. Then he sleeved blood from under his nose and turned to Old Marco. "Thanks, friend," he said. "You timed it nicely."

And all the men at the bar knew what the whispered conference had been about between the Kid and the blind fiddler when the Kid had first entered the saloon.

Then one of the men at the bar walked over to the limp, twisted body of Stud Lacey on the floor. He hunkered down beside him. His hand went under Lacey's shirt and after a moment he turned around. "Must've had a bad heart," he said, and winked broadly. "The Kid was sure as hell right. He *didn't* need no guns!"

But Kid Smiles didn't hear that. He was talking with Rufus Bean, the printer, asking him for a job as a printer's devil in his shop, telling him that he was going to settle down in Rockrim. And Rufus, surprised but happy about it, was nodding yes indeed.

A few minutes later the Kid walked out. He had to go to his Ma's funeral. And it wouldn't be so bad now, because he'd kept his two death-bed promises made to her—to never again wear a gun and to settle down in town and become an honest business man. He had worried about that. He had thought for awhile he'd have to break one or the other of those oaths because of Stud Lacey. But thanks to a crazy idea about the shot-like pop of a busted fiddle string, and Old Marco, it had worked out all right.

FIRST FRONTIER SIDEWALK

Ellsworth, Kansas, principally because of the railroad, became Abilene's greatest rival—finally its successor as a major cattle town. But Ellsworth was also famous for its sidewalk, the only real, honest-to-goodness sidewalk west of Kansas City in the cow country. It was made of magnesium limestone and was in front of the Grand Central Hotel. Arthur Larkin, proprietor, owed this first frontier sidewalk a big debt of gratitude. For it has been said that, because of the sidewalk, Texas cattlemen made the Grand Central Hotel their headquarters.



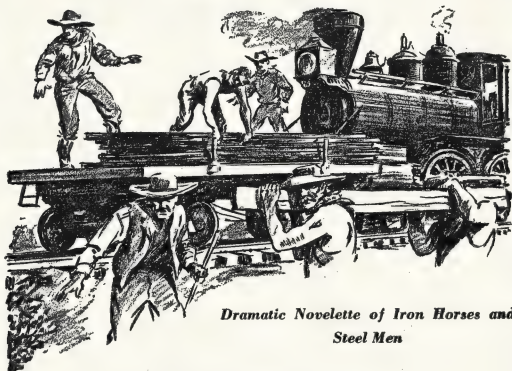
HOT RAILS

Sheriff Bill went to work on the syndicate spy. . . .



Ride with Sheriff Bill Sterling as he bucks the cordon of syndicate gunhawks in a desperate play to bring a railroad to poverty-stricken Lobo Wells.

TO LOBO WELLS



*Dramatic Novelette of Iron Horses and
Steel Men*

By ART LAWSON

CHAPTER

Golden Noose

1

Sheriff Bill Sterling dismounted to lead his big black horse, Midnight, across the catwalk of Blind Bridge high over the Brazos. On both sides of the catwalk the gleam of steel rails had been dulled with rust.

Below, the lazily swirling water dyed the same color by clay from the river's reddish banks looked black tonight. Only overhead was everything as it should be with a star-studded sky, serene, endless, letting stray rays drop into the river to dance briefly on the edges of slowly moving whirlpools.

He knew that crossing this bridge was a hazardous venture—but tonight he was in too great a hurry to use his usual caution. This was the shortest route to the

abandoned construction camp on the river's far bank and the town beyond. More than only his life depended on his delivering a message at the camp and getting on to Lobo Wells quickly.

The sheriff set his jaw and went ahead. He had about reached mid point when the half-expected rifle barked from the far side. The heavy bullet whined down between the rails to clip the sheriff on the shoulder, ripping cloth, digging a gouge in his lean flesh. It hit him like a red-hot poker being dragged across his skin, then went on screaming through the night.

Right on its tail was another bullet, this one aimed lower. The ambusher was shooting to kill.

The sheriff dropped laxly from the saddle pretending to be mortally wounded. He struck a rail, rolled over it onto the ties. A bullet hit steel and spattered. He had no cover here whatsoever so he kept

on rolling, let himself drop, turning over and over, through the night. And even as he rushed down to meet the black-red water, the ambusher was still trying to wing him on the fly.

He straightened out, shot into the river like a log, feet first, astonished that his feet should sting as if they had been hit on the soles with a board. He went on down, down, slowly losing momentum, until the ears that had hummed from the wind began to ache with the pressure. He clenched his jaws to hold his breath as long as possible. An ambusher who would try to pick him off while falling would undoubtedly follow him downstream to make sure of the kill.

There was an eternity while the pressure eased as he floated upward. When his mouth emerged he gulped twice at the welcome air that stung his lungs. He immediately sank again. A dozen times he performed this before the current swept him up close enough to shore so his feet touched the slippery clay. Even then he ducked again until he had drifted into a spot where a half-fallen willow provided shelter. There he waited a long time with his feet in the muck, his head in the leaves. He glanced upstream to check on his horse but the bridge was out of sight. A bitterness grew in him.

He climbed out, took off his boots and emptied water from them. He dumped out his twin holsters—and twisted the water from his socks. Bare-footed, he set about hunting a horse he could conveniently steal. . . .

SHERIFF Bill Sterling drifted his stolen horse up behind the Lobo Wells church, and released it. He did not bother to knock on the door of the woodshed that was built leanto fashion behind the church. The door was already half open, so he merely stepped inside and closed it.

He sat on a bench alongside the south wall and listened to the night sounds. On the other end of the shanty were a couple of bunks one above the other. In the lower bunk a man known as Windy George snored peacefully. Windy George was the preacher of Lobo Wells.

The sheriff made a low whistling sound. The snoring stopped. The sheriff said: "It's me, Preacher. Sheriff Bill."

Windy George rolled over in bed. His big bare feet slapped on the rough floor of the leanto. He was running his tongue around his mouth to take away the dryness. "What have you done lately that you're ashamed of?" he finally asked. "Nobody comes to see me at night unless he's ashamed of something he's just done. If folks are proud of themselves or their deeds they come around in the morning."

The sheriff said: "I did do something I'm ashamed of, Preacher. I let some lousy bushwhacker nearly kill me. I must be slowing down. . . . Now, hang a blanket over that window, will you? I got something to show you."

"Sure," Windy George said.

When the window was blacked out the sheriff scratched a match. He squinted eyes against the bright rays. Windy George got a candle from a box and in a moment the friendly glow filled the room. Windy George's round and amiable face was faintly pink and smooth above his nightshirt.

"I want you to keep this for me," the sheriff said. "I don't know who to trust in this town." The sheriff brought damp papers from an inside pocket. They had been printed with a new-fashioned machine called the "typewriter." They were in duplicate and the signatures at the bottom were smudged with Brazos River water. The sheriff was so dogged tired his voice hardly rose above a whisper. "These are a lien on the LW&B," he said.

The parson's eyes opened wide. "Where'd you get them?" he whispered.

The sheriff shrugged. It set pain to jumping in his wounded shoulder. The LW&B was a railroad, or rather the beginning of a railroad—The Lobo Wells and Brazos River Railroad. It had been built from the junction at the main line to the river. But the company had gone broke on the bridge and had laid rails no farther.

Lobo Wells was still unconnected with the outside. Since the railroad had been financed by the community of Lobo Wells and the promise of State land grants it would be a major tragedy if it was allowed to fail. If the railroad went into receivership the construction company as its chief creditor would take it over. The people would lose everything.

"I got these papers from the president of the LW&B," the sheriff said. "They're

legal as hell. All we got to do now is build the railroad to the center of Lobo Wells and run one scheduled train before the legislature retires. If we don't finish it before then the land grants revert to the state and King Canobie takes over the road. If we do finish it—Lobo Wells is made."

Windy George was pessimistic. "Those liens don't mean anything," he said. "We already got all our money in that railroad. We don't have any equipment. We can't build that road in time. We might just as well forget all about it."

Doggedly the sheriff shook his head. "We got rolling stock and rails that belong to the road. If every able-bodied man in this town got out there to work on grading and cutting ties we can finish that road before the legislature retires. We can cash in on those land grants and pay off the Canobie Construction Company. Listen, Preacher: King Canobie robbed that railroad, even if we can't prove it. It cost twice as much to build that bridge as it should have. He kept on stalling all the time. Now's our chance to get back at him. And damn it—we can beat him."

The preacher's round eyes began to gleam. He did not know much about this sort of thing but was always ready to lend a hand at leading a crusade. "I got to ask you something," he said. "But you don't have to answer it."

The sheriff shrugged, saying neither yes or no.

"King Canobie ain't going to like this even a little bit," the preacher said. "When he finds out he's going to lose the railroad he'll start troubling us."

The sheriff's eyes lighted up. "He already knows. I had to borrow his equipment. I persuaded him to let us use it, to coin a phrase. He thinks we can't build the road. He thinks he'll get it anyway—and the more that's built when he takes over the better."

"Then why'd he try to shoot you?" Windy George asked.

"I'm not sure," the sheriff said. "I don't even know that it was a Canobie man at the end of the bridge. But my guess is that the shooting was only the start of a delaying action. Or maybe he was trying to scare me. They'll try to keep us from finishing the road in time. If it looks like we'll succeed—they might do anything to stop us." He hesitated a moment. "There won't be any of us safe from their gunmen."

The preacher knew that if he joined the sheriff in this project he might well become the target of enemy guns, too. He made his mind up instantly. "I'll string along with you. You know, I kinda think I might be able to get the men to work. I think I can." He leaned over to bring a squat jug from under the bunk. He pushed it across the floor toward the sheriff. "You look like you can use a drop of this."

The sheriff took a good deep drink. It was fair whiskey. He put the cork into the jug and handed it back to the preacher. Windy George never used the stuff, himself. He put the jug under the bunk.

Suddenly the sheriff's eyes moved toward the door. He slapped out the candle and froze, tense, listening. He heard a man running down the alley next to the church—then silence. There was no use trying to find the eavesdropper now. He would have plenty of places in which to hide. In the darkness the sheriff whispered:

"They won't leave us without trouble for a minute, Preacher."

"We won't stop fighting for a second," Windy George said.

CHAPTER

2

King's Challenge

The sheriff slept through the day. At night he emerged onto the main street

YOUR COPY MAY BE LATE

Because of the exigencies of war-time transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after it leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.

in a clean outfit with guns freshly oiled. He was ready for hell or worse. The town seemed to have gotten ready, too, while he slept.

Old Windy George had buttonholed everybody. He had made copies of the lien and tacked them to doors all over town. Windy George had made speeches on every street corner and from every available gallery. When the sheriff came down Main Street in the deep shade of the wooden awnings he could hear Windy George's voice pleading in the Brown Bottle Saloon. He stopped by a window to listen.

"Are we going to lie down like rats?" Windy harangued, "while the Wall Street gang steals our very bread from our mouths, while it dooms to starvation and disease our wives, our mothers, our children and sweethearts?" None of this had any real bearing on the case in hand, Wall Street being far away and not involved in the railroad's troubles. But it was popular at the time to blame the bankers for everything, and the preacher made the best of it. "Are we going to let the big money men take away our very substance—" he went on—"or are we going to stand up on our hind legs and fight like men? Are we going to fight? Or go down to our graves marked as spineless cowards?"

"Fight!" someone howled.

"Are we going to let that arch-thief, King Canobie, take this road in which we have invested all our hard-earned dimes and dollars?" Windy George got closer to the point. "Or are we going to fight!"

"Fight!" the crowd chanted. "Fight!"

The men in the saloon cheered wildly, hooting the old rebel yell. The sheriff moved on along the dark street. His heart was beating with a quickened pulse. He stopped at old Jack Bean's General Merchandise Store where half a dozen of the town's older men were gathered on the liar's bench. They recognized the sheriff and called to him.

"Bill," one of them said, "you sure as hell started something." It was Colonel Smith, white-haired ranchman who had sunk everything into the railroad. "I've sent one of my boys out to the spread to organize my outfit, to bring in the chuck-wagon and the remuda. Them cowboys of mine ain't good for much, but they'll cut

ties for that road until the devil takes Texas back to hell."

"Give Windy George the credit," the sheriff said. "He sure is getting the boys to work."

"We're all in it now," the colonel said. He pulled at his long mustache and glanced up through the early evening gloom at the sheriff. "Heard your horse was found in the middle of the new bridge."

"Got ornery on me," the sheriff said. "Wouldn't move one way or the other. So I had to walk home last night."

The old rancher eyed him narrowly. "I'll assign a couple of my boys to sort of ride wing on you."

"Thanks," the sheriff said. "Reckon I won't need them. I'll be right in there with a pick and shovel with the rest of you."

The sheriff waved to the men. He went on down Main Street at an easy saunter. He felt free to take a minute off for more personal matters.

HE picked up a couple of deputies and rode to the construction camp where the work had stopped this side of the big bridge. The camp was entirely mobile, built on box and flat cars. There were bunk cars for the workmen who had drifted away when the railroad ran out of funds. There was a chuck car, too, and an administration car now manned by a hireling of King Canobie. And the telegraph operator, Nelly Wallace.

A light gleamed behind the small square windows of the headquarters car as the sheriff and his men trotted up in the night. The sheriff wheeled sharply.

"I want you boys to keep an eye on all this stuff," he said. "Most of it belongs to Canobie. We only have the use of it according to the contract. I don't expect he'll wreck much of it—but he might try to damage some of the railroad property, like the engine, to slow us down. It's up to you to see to it that he doesn't."

The men nodded grimly. All three dismounted. The deputies led their horses off to tie them up in a more secure spot. They would make their rounds on foot.

There had been movement on the car platform while the sheriff gave his men their orders. It was Nelly Wallace who had come out to see who her night visitors

were. She had a small pistol in her hand. "Come on up and show your face!" she said sharply.

The sheriff moved in, grinning.

"Bill!" the girl cried. "Why—I found your Midnight horse this morning on the bridge and brought him in. I've been scared to death, Bill."

Sheriff Bill climbed up to the platform in one step. He held the girl in an easy embrace. He did not kiss her. Even here it was automatic for him to back up against the car so as not to silhouette himself.

"Just left him there to put a couple hombres off my trail," the sheriff said.

Vigorously the girl shook her head. Golden curls danced in the starlight. "No you didn't. I heard those shots last night."

Her father was an engineer who had driven the locomotive during construction of the LW&B. The sheriff had often wondered why she had not gone along with her father when he left after the work shut-down. It had never occurred to Bill that she had stayed to be near him.

"Seen Canobie today?" he asked her, avoiding talking about last night's shooting.

She said: "No." In the starlight he saw the curve of her mouth, the depth of her eyes. "A couple of Canobie's men were over this afternoon. They said they were taking an inventory. Slick Lee and Bull-head Murphy. The girl shivered slightly. "I don't trust them, Bill. I never did. They're up to something."

The sheriff had expected them sooner or later. He would have to watch for them. "Are your wires strung up?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "Everything's in working condition. Canobie wanted it kept up in case construction started again. He's still paying me."

"Not after tonight," the sheriff sprang it on her. "Lobo Wells is taking over. The railroad gave us a lien on the line if we finish it in time to get the land grants. Canobie's lent us the equipment, and—"

"Where are you going to get the men?" she asked softly, clinging to him.

"They'll be out tomorrow," he said. "But we need an engineer. Can you get your Pa?"

"Can try," she said with enthusiasm.

"Then get in there on your ticker," he said. "We need a man to drive the loco-

motive. If you can't locate your Pa find somebody else. We'll pay the feller a bonus, if we have to, cash."

The girl ducked into the car. The telegraph instrument clicked sharply under her dextrous fingers. The sheriff listened to the night that seemed to hold nothing but peace.

Then the girl was at the door again. She had turned out her lamp. The sheriff felt her trembling with half-suppressed anger.

"The wires are cut," she said.

THE line had been cut just below Lobo Wells Junction where the LW&B joined the main line. It had been so cleverly done and rejoined it took the sheriff and a small posse most of the day to find it. Meanwhile Nelly Wallace had gone up to the junction to send her message and hire an engineer. Her father could not come down. The only boomer she could locate was so drunk when her message reached him that she could not be sure he would arrive.

Tired and angry she came down the rails on a hand-car, clattered across the bridge, pulled the switch and stopped in the siding where the construction cars were parked.

The camp was already taking on life. One of the cowboys had appointed himself fireman and was stoking the locomotive in anticipation of the engineer's arrival. Other cowboys were setting up a camp of their own near the river where there was plenty of timber for ties. Women from town were cleaning up the bunk cars and chuck car—and the first shift of men had gone to work on the road, itself, grading it in readiness for the rails.

It was an inspiring sight for Nelly Wallace. Feeling much better, she climbed the stairs of the administration car. To her astonishment King Canobie was there waiting for her.

Nelly did not like King Canobie.

"We found the break in the line," she said sourly. "It's fixed." She assumed Canobie would know all about it.

"Heard the damn thing ticking," he said. Canobie was a tinhorn who had chosen to gamble in railroads rather than in poker. He looked it, too, lean of face, dark-eyed, feral. "Well, Kid, pack your doofunnies. I don't work here any more. Neither do

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you. I got a new job for you. A better one."

The girl's eyes were level. "I'm not taking your job," she said. "I already have a perfectly satisfactory one."

Canobie blew a ring of smoke and shot a smaller ring through it. He watched both drift up and whirl to the ceiling of the car. "It's up to you. With a bunch of amateurs building this road there's going to be lots of accidents—like that broken wire, for instance." He was making thinly veiled threats. "You might even be hurt, yourself. . . . Now if you were smart—"

"I'm not smart," she cut in on him. The urge was great in her to slap his face. But she wheeled away, controlling herself. Standing by the window of the car, she looked out on the women and grown boys and girls working in common cause beside their menfolk. "You'll never know what it is *not* to be smart, Mister Canobie. But I know. You and your grubby outfit might be smart but you'll never hold a candle to these people. Look at them."

Canobie came over to look. He did not see what the girl saw. He saw only a lot of fools burning themselves out, working for him and not knowing it. He began to laugh, a deep chuckle that ran through the base of his throat. Nelly turned to him with wide eyes. He lifted a hand to touch her shoulder.

"You're right, Kid," he said. "If you ever decide to be smart—look me up."

He dropped his hand and turned toward the door. He had heard the rattle of spurs outside.

The sheriff came in, squinting eyes to accustom themselves to the dusky interior of the car. He had come here looking for Canobie after hearing that the gambler was around. "You won another day, Canobie," he said shortly. "Now, get the hell out—and stay out."

"I came down to offer my services," Canobie answered suavely. "I thought you could use an old hand on this job."

The sheriff stood by the door. He and Canobie were sizing each other up, wondering how far they could go to taunt the other into an open move.

"We're getting along fine without you," the sheriff said.

HOT RAILS TO LOBO WELLS

Canobie shrugged. He edged away from the girl. At the door he halted to bow to her. "When you get into trouble—just remember King Canobie."

The sheriff answered for her. "Don't worry about that. We'll all remember."

Bill pushed the door in his face. The underground war would be in the open from now on.

CHAPTER

Canobie Strikes!

3

3 The Lobo Wells outfit put men to guarding the bridge, and more men at intervals along the right of way clear up to the junction switch tower.

The engineer arrived on the afternoon train at the junction. He was so drunk they had to dip him in the river. They did not even let him change clothes before taking him to the cab and making him run a string of flats up to the junction where the rails were stacked.

Day after day, night after night, the road crept on across the prairie toward Lobo Wells. Day after day and night after night the sheriff patrolled the rails up to junction and back again, even past the end of the grading and once he caught a Canobie man in the crew deliberately working with the townsmen so he could get on the inside and wreck some equipment. The sheriff beat the man up and banished him.

Sometimes the sheriff would put a hand to pick or shovel. And always in the middle of the building was old Colonel Smith hauling ties, and Windy George giving out great quantities of free advice.

The sheriff came up the line to stop by the preacher. Windy George finished driving his spike.

"Look," the sheriff said.

Windy George gaped. Overnight they had pushed that road up within sight of Lobo Wells. The green trees were an island on the prairie. The spire of Windy George's little church poked its white peak above the leaves. For once Windy George could not say anything. . . .

The railroad moved on. They built a siding up closer to Lobo Wells and brought the camp to it. They ran wires down for the telegraph. The girl sent a message. She sent it to the junction where it was



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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

forwarded. It was addressed to the state legislature.

"HONORABLE SIRs:

THE LOBO WELLS AND BRAZOS RAILROAD WILL BE COMPLETED THE SIXTEENTH INSTANT. WE RESPECTFULLY REQUEST YOU TO SEND A COMMITTEE TO INSPECT THE ROAD AND TO HONOR THE CITY OF LOBO WELLS AS ITS GUESTS AT A MUNICIPAL GATHERING TO CELEBRATE THE COMPLETION OF THE ROAD.

WILLIAM STERLING, SHERIFF,
LOBO COUNTY."

The wires hummed and brought an answer. Because of this very special occasion their own representative would come down to the junction with one colleague on the sixteenth. He would have to miss the legislature's closing exercises on the seventeenth—but what was that to the opening of a new railroad?

When the girl read this answer to the men gathered around the chuck car they let loose with a wild yell. This day they threw the clock away. They worked until they could no longer stand on their feet and then they slept in the grass beside the rails. When they woke they worked on with Windy George always in the lead.

They were actually going down Main Street now, one bunch grading ahead of the track layers while old Colonel Smith's boys snaked up half-squared ties at the ends of their lariats.

"I'm going up to the end of the line," the sheriff told Windy George. "Last trip." He grinned wearily. "Tomorrow's the sixteenth. Those two lawmakers are showing up on the afternoon train at the junction. I'm going to have our engine polished up and waiting there with a string of cars. To fill the contract we have to run a scheduled train from the junction to the Wells. That'll be it. Put up some flags and stuff. Set guards every half mile. I'll double the guard at the bridge."

Windy George leaned against the shovel for a second. "If I had a chaw of decent tobacco," he said, "I could spit from here to the place where we're going to have the station. I reckon we'll be done a wee bit ahead of time. We'll have a station and everything for you, even if it's only an out-house with a sign on it."

HOT RAILS TO LOBO WELLS

"We got to have passengers, too," the sheriff said. "Send out anybody who ain't doing anything."

"This county'll never forget tomorrow," Windy George promised. "We'll put on a celebration nobody'll ever forget."

The sheriff grinned. He moved up-rail, aiming himself straight for the mobile camp parked on its siding. The horse he rode had learned that the sheriff liked to stop there beside the car that carried the singing wires.

The locomotive chuffed by hauling a couple of flat cars loaded with rails. The engineer was grinning. For a boomer he had stayed remarkably sober.

"How's it goin', Sheriff?" he shouted.

"We're measuring it in inches." The sheriff grinned back. "And tomorrow, Feller, I'll get you the biggest and best bottle in town."

The train of cars rattled on.

THE girl was flushed with excitement when the sheriff stopped off at the administration car. Her telegraph instrument was clicking steadily. She motioned to the sheriff for silence. He sat in a big chair in one corner of the car. That chair had once been exclusively assigned to King Canobie. It was very comfortable, and the steady telegraphic cadence was like a lullaby. The sheriff fell asleep without knowing it.

He woke shivering. The key was quiet now and the lamp turned low in the car. Waiting for him to wake up was the girl, sitting silently beside one of the small square windows. When she heard him move she turned to face him, eyes wide. The sheriff bit back a short curse. He had been sleeping for nearly eight hours.

"You were dead on your feet," the girl said, defending herself before he could accuse her. "You wouldn't have been any good if you had gone out. You would have slept in the saddle."

This was probably true. It was after midnight now and the sheriff would have to drive himself ahead. The sleep had taken all the spine out of him. Only his set will got him to his feet.

"What's happened," he asked, "while I was sleeping? Anything?"

"Lots!" she said, her eye brightening. "And all good." She moved around to a

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

small stove where coffee was kept hot. "Everything's fine downtown. They'll have the whole thing set before noontime. They're taking benches out of the church to put on the flat cars—and they're getting every flag in town ready to hoist first thing in the morning. They have a double guard and bonfires all along the rails. The man up to junction relayed a telegram saying the legislators had left Austin and had made connections with the afternoon train. And I got another wire from my Pop. He says he'll be driving that express."

She almost shouted she was so exuberant. But the sheriff felt a stirring of trouble. King Canobie had been too damn quiet.

"I'm glad your old man can see what we've done," was the sheriff's only comment.

"It sure'll be good seein' him again," the girl said.

The sheriff drank the coffee she poured for him. As a final check he rounded up a couple of not-too-tired cowboys and rode the hand-car up to the junction, taking it easy, listening to the even click of rail joints. Passing dozens of ghostly bonfires, each one kept up by a woman or boy, passing cowboys riding their beat along the right of way, the sheriff shouted encouragement. They stopped to talk to the guards on the bridge and found everything quiet. At the far side the guards had seen nothing alarming. They went on to the junction with the main line where more men watched the switches. There the sheriff left his boys with the hand-car and climbed into the switch-tower.

Dawn had arrived. The switchman was sleeping soundly. The sheriff shook him to wake him.

"I'm going to keep patrolling the track," the sheriff told him, "from one end to the other, from now until that damn train arrives at Lobo Wells. I'll be back here about noontime. I want you to switch our train up to the south platform. I want you also to be damn sure the other train stops. Sabe?"

"I'll take care of it," the man promised. "Okay," the sheriff said. "Tell Nelly Wallace I'm on my way back. Tell her to hold the train until I arrive."

The man worked the instrument.

"She'll hold it," he said.

HOT RAILS TO LOBO WELLS

"Thanks." The sheriff climbed down the ladder, walked slowly back to the hand-car where his two men were waiting for him. They got aboard and headed for home—and everything seemed too damn perfect. Canobie had put off the expected lethal blow too long. He could never break through these defenses. Yet fear continued gnawing at the sheriff.

And with good cause. When he had rolled to a halt on the main line beside the much decorated train a group of men were clustered around the engine on its siding.

"What's going on?" the sheriff shouted.

There was no smoke coming from the engine's stack. The locomotive sat like a dead thing on its rails. The crowd opened to let the sheriff through. He leaped up into the cab. The engineer was dead drunk. Pails of water tossed in his face had not moved him. The cowboy-fireman was in no better condition. Beside them were half a dozen bottles. On one was a tag.

*Congratulations on completion of the LW&B
—King Canobie.*

"How did that get in here?" the sheriff shouted.

"Came in the mail, reckon," somebody said.

It was disaster. Anyone could fire the locomotive—but no one could drive it except these two men. And they could not possibly sober up in time to meet the train at the junction. Canobie had gotten through.

CHAPTER

4

Death Signal

But Lobo Wells was just beginning to fight. Sheriff Bill Sterling pitched the two men out of the cab and started a fire under the boiler. While waiting for steam to come up in the pipes, they rounded up all the rope and harness in town and hitched a hundred horses to the train and started for the junction.

There was nothing in the contract to say that the train had to be hauled by steam. But even with the oversized team it would be next to impossible to make a round trip in time to save the road.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

There was only one thing to do—drive that engine whether you knew how or not.

Unexpectedly help came. As the horses hauled the train past the siding where the construction camp was parked Nelly Wallace ran up, golden hair blowing in the prairie wind that smoothed her dress over lovely curves. She swung into the cab where the sweating sheriff was heaving wood into the firebox. He hardly glanced up at her.

"Get back to your telegraph," he said. "We can't have everybody deserting their jobs at the last minute."

"I'm staying here," she said. "I just sent a message to the junction—told them to expect us on schedule. I practically grew up in an engine cab. I've ridden all over the country with Pop. I can run this train."

The sheriff turned his grimy face to her. He was astounded. This had never occurred to him though he knew the girl had railroaded with her father.

"I can!" she insisted. "And I will."

She got into the engineer's seat. The sheriff and another man went back to work heaving wood. Half a hundred cowpunchers whooped and hollered at their horses, picking up speed. Two miles, five miles, seven, eight miles—and the needle on the steam gauge was slowly rising.

"Okay," the girl finally shouted. "We can go under our own power. Cast off, boys!"

Cowboys yelled. Passengers who had been running alongside to lighten the load scrambled to get aboard before being left behind. Just for morale effect the girl used a breath of steam to blow a tiny hoot on the whistle. She pulled the throttle and the drivers took hold. The locomotive went to work with a roar that drowned out the cheers.

The passengers stood on the flatcars by the bolted-down benches from Windy George's church and howled with triumph. Windy George, himself, in his best clothes delivered a lecture on the occasion but nobody heard it.

Under the fairly expert hand of the girl the train rattled and banged over the uneven roadbed. A couple of cowboys sitting on the cowcatcher kept their eyes on the shining rails ahead. All along the grade weary guards stood watchful, cheering as

HOT RAILS TO LOBO WELLS

the train banged by and their womenfolk aboard the flatcars waved rolled parasols and handkerchiefs.

At the bridge the girl slowed down until guards waved them on. They crossed the Brazos then with a great, hollow rattling to clatter along the last few miles to the junction. There they slowed and stopped in their own part of the "Y" of track. The girl blew the whistle. She hung on the cord until the last ounce of steam was gone. They had arrived on time.

The sheriff stood up from his job of firing the boiler. He wiped sweat and soot from his forehead and grinned broadly. Feeling light-headed he kissed the girl, much to her astonishment and his own amazement. He had not intended doing it. Something inside had driven him to it.

Blushing brilliantly she averted her eyes, then flashed them back on him. "We licked them," she said.

"We sure as hell did."

There was a moment of silence. From away down the track of the main line a whistle blew. They could not see the ap-



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Within ten years, he was able to retire to this country with a fortune. He had been honored by fellowships in the World's leading geographical societies, for his work as a geographer. And today, 30 years later, he is still so athletic, capable of so much work, so young in appearance, it is hard to believe he has lived so long.

As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this paper a 9000-word treatise. He says the time has come for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation, to sincere readers of this notice. For your free copy, address The Institute of Mentalphysics, 218 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. K-278, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free books have been printed.



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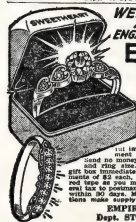
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

proaching train because a small hill blocked the view from the LW&B tracks. But they knew that it was their train—the train piloted by the girl's father—carrying the state delegation.

"I never thought Canobie would let us take it this easy," the sheriff said.

"You just outthought him," the girl said. Then the sheriff stiffened, pointed down the line. "Look at that!"

The switch had been thrown. A red light shone on the main line at the junction—but a white light shone on the LW&B. That oncoming train would turn off the main line and plow right into their own little gala rig. And because the LW&B train was out of sight behind the hill a wreck was almost certain.

"Can you back this?"

The sheriff had no need to finish his question. Already the girl had sensed danger and pulled the throttle. But the steam had all been used up in the whistle blowing and the inexpert firing of the sheriff had not built up a new head fast enough. The train would not move at all.

The sheriff had not a second to spare. He jumped from the cab to run toward the switch tower down the track. As he neared it he suddenly learned that he was the target for a sniper back in the brush. King Canobie had finally struck . . .

A BULLET bit a hole in the sheriff's Stetson but the lawman did not hesitate. King Canobie had apparently gotten to the switchman as he had to the fireman and engineer. The sheriff had to run in full view of the bushwhacker.

The main-line train thundered like a giant on a spree, coming down the tracks at full throttle. Now brakes began to take hold as Pop Wallace slowed his train to stop at the station; but he was still going too fast to negotiate the curve that he did not know he would have to take. Out of control the train would smash up everything down there. The sheriff shouted at Pop Wallace and waved for him to stop; but Pop knowing that there was a celebration on only waved back thinking that the sheriff was over excited.

As the train reached him the sheriff arrived at the switch tower. He went up the ladder on a run. A bullet splattered on an

HOT RAILS TO LOBO WELLS

iron rung, stinging him. Another bullet nicked his thigh as he climbed through the trap. Then a second gun opened up from somewhere in the rear and he slammed the door shut.

There he found the switchman with a knife in his back. A window crashed on the south side of the tower. Hardly thinking, the sheriff dragged his pistol as he reached for the lever that would move the switch and change the lights. He felt the thing give in his hand.

For a second he froze, waiting for the holocaust. Brakes screamed mightily. The train stopped with a shrieking whistle.

In the cab of the little LW&B engine Nelly Wallace hung on the whistle cord to answer with such a low head of steam it sounded more like a groan. Windy George, in the absence of the sheriff, went across the platform to greet the delegation from Austin.

Then the sheriff spotted movement in the mesquite, a man dodging through the brush on the hillside. He rested the muzzle of his pistol on the window sill and pulled trigger. The man stumbled. The sheriff pulled trigger again and the man was thrown forward as if he had been kicked by a horse. He plunged into the brush to lie there motionless.

The sheriff took a deep breath to steady himself. What it was that warned him he never knew, some slight sound that subconsciously he knew was out of place here. He wheeled at the sensed menace just as a pistol barked in the tower with a shattering roar and gunflame spurted from the trapdoor.

He fired two fast ones. Both hit King Canobie who was such a poor loser. Canobie's hand slipped slowly from the grip—and the trapdoor banged down. The sheriff could hear the dead man bouncing along the ladder rungs as he fell. . . .

The whistles and cheers were so terrific the legislators had not heard the exchange

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

of gunfire—and the few who knew that something desperate had happened kept quiet about it. The sheriff decided to leave it this way. He sent a couple of men to bring in the body of King Canobie and the rifleman in the brush, to bring them in after the departure of the train so they would not interfere with the celebration. Then he went back to the engine cab where the girl waited for him.

The two men from Austin were there, too, with Windy George. The preacher was telling them about the railroad that had been built by the people in record time. Windy was making it a very eloquent speech.

But the sheriff was not listening. He stood there in the cab beside the girl. "Let 'er go, Nelly," he said.

She opened the throttle and the train moved slowly toward the bridge, toward Lobo Wells. They had plenty of time now to complete their run. Something that had been bothering the sheriff for quite a while suddenly seemed more important to him than all this. He moved closer to the girl and whispered to her.

"I'm not goin' to be so busy for a spell—" he said—"and I thought—uh—"

She beamed on him. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him right there in front of the distinguished visitors. "Of course I'll marry you," she said.

Windy George shouted: "Hey—watch where you're going!"

"I am watching—with my eyes wide open," the girl said, and she wasted more precious steam on a whistle blast as the train rolled across the bridge.

THE END

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(Continued)

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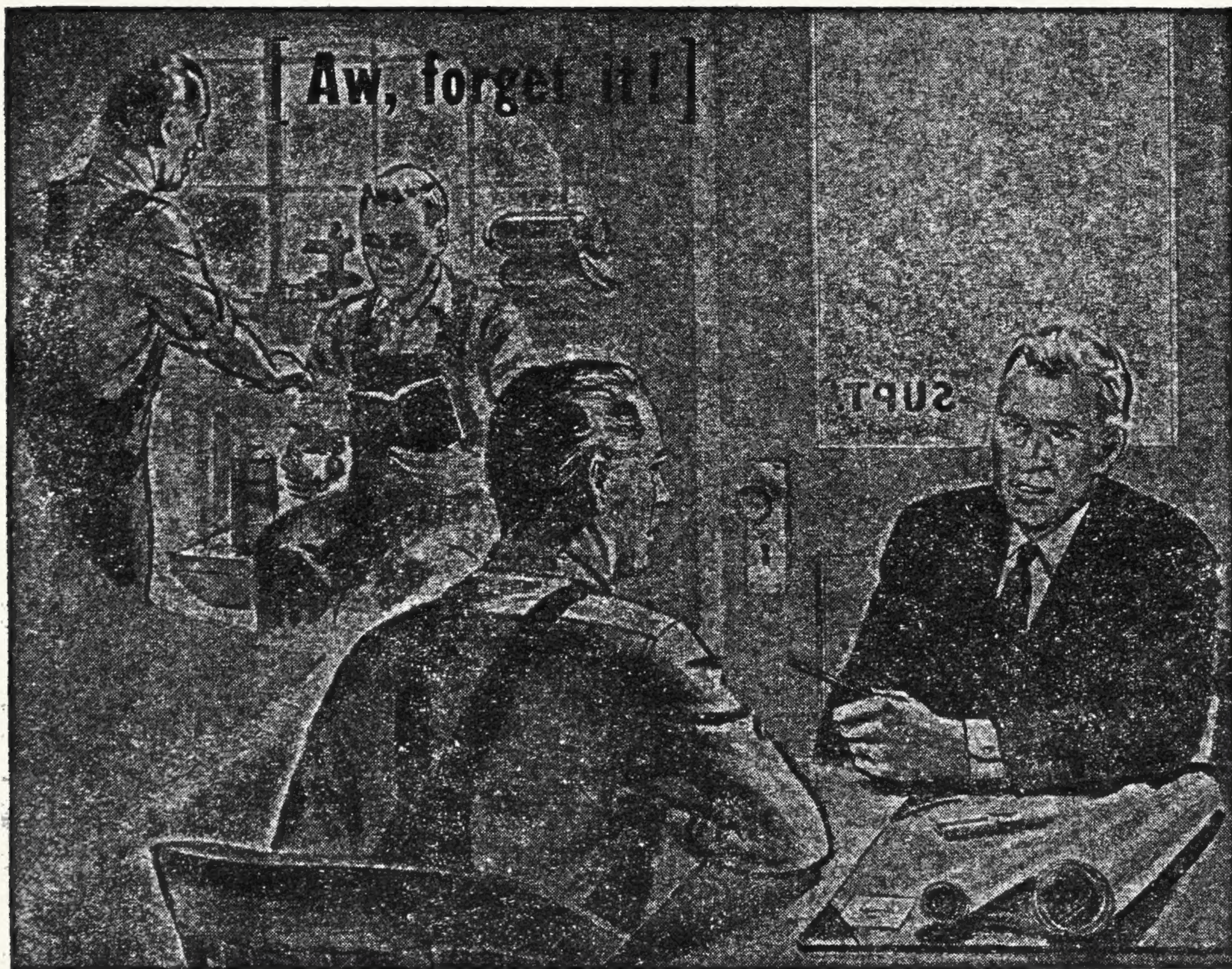
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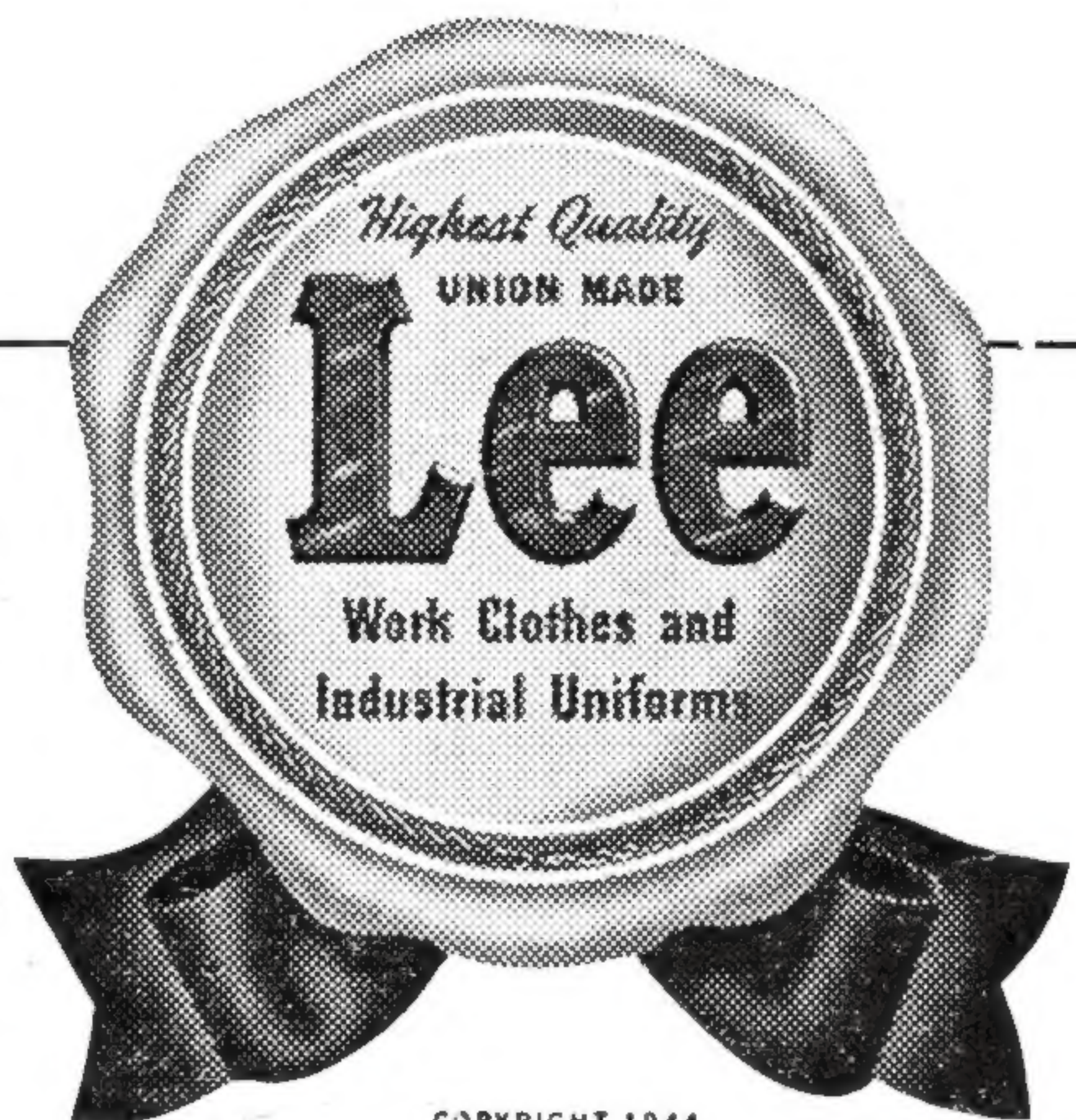
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